CONTAGION

Cover illustration by Suzanne Emerson, 1998.

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Editor's Note

*As has been past practice, the editors of **Contagion** continue to select for referee process papers from the annual meeting of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion. The theme of the 1997 meeting in Graz was violence and film, as suggested by the cover of this volume. But, as other essays contained herein indicate, we also continue to welcome manuscripts from authors in all academic disciplines and fields of professional activity which bear on René Girard's mimetic model of human behavior and cultural organization.*

THE PARTY'S OVER (ALMOST): TERMINAL CELEBRATION IN CONTEMPORARY FILM

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Movies are a universal language, and as we approach more and more integrated levels of global economy and communication they increasingly become a universal symbol system. At these levels a modern movie from China or Nigeria will display swiftly recognizable sensibilities and situations to any viewer in Europe or the USA, and vice versa. But should we not, therefore, also feel prompted to indicate a universal de-symbolization, if movies along with the modern world reflect constitutive elements of decomposition and collapse. For I would like to suggest in this essay that not only do movies constitute a kind of planetary envelope, literally a "film" of collective imaginal references wrapped around the world, but that this "film" is peculiarly apt to dismemberment, to breaking up before our eyes even as it still holds together, to a built-in "crisis" that is part of its very nature. The two films that form a background to these remarks, *Natural Born Killers* and *Pulp Fiction*, are, I suggest, movies that set out actively to represent this cinematic crisis.

In Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (Bk. 2, Vol. 5, 795-97), the grandfather of modern capitalism discusses the fate of the laborer who leaves a rural village in which he is known and his life observed, or "attended to," by others. He moves to a great city where promptly "he is sunk in obscurity and darkness." Smith's concern is not directly to remedy this misery of the worker forced to seek employment in the anonymity of the city, but to avoid a possible course of action he might take. He wishes to divert him from the possibility of joining "a small religious sect," in whose company the newly depersonalized worker will achieve "a degree of consideration which he never had before."

Adam Smith does not relish the prospect of the mushroom growth of closed, "unsocial" religious factions within the heart of industrialized political economies, and he proposes two remedies by which the state, "without violence," might correct these tendencies. His proposals are remarkable both for their conjunction of certain themes and their prescience.

The first is a plan for the imposition of the study of science and philosophy on the middle ranks of the poor, for science is "the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition." Next to this classic Enlightenment nostrum comes the following:

> The second of those remedies is the frequency and gaiety of publick diversions. The state, by encouraging, that is by giving entire liberty to all those who for their own interest would attempt, without scandal or indecency, to amuse and divert the people by painting, poetry, musick, dancing; by all sorts of dramatic representations and exhibitions, would easily dissipate, in the greater part of them, that melancholy and gloomy humour which is almost always the nurse of popular superstition and enthusiasm. Publick diversions have always been the object of dread and hatred, to all the fanatical promoters of those popular frenzies.

Here are the movies before the fact. Adam Smith in his charter for emergent industrial capitalism sketches an alliance between education and entertainment that together will prevent any reversion to the darkness of small-scale society and its ready excrescence of religious fanaticism. All of the components of cinema aesthetic are assembled in Smith's prophetic vision: cinematography, script, score, choreography, plot, spectacle. The only thing lacking was the technology to capture them together on film, and with the release of inventive energies attending division of labor that would only be a matter of time. Cinema is the born ally of rational modernity, and is in itself the child of industrial alienation and the need to find a mass aesthetic to substitute for the control exercised by the sacred in a traditionally local setting.

But, of course, there are several levels of irony that are not lost on us here. First, Smith says explicitly that the state has a direct interest in such mass entertainment. What then is the relationship between the much prized freedom of the creative artist and the very concrete concern for self-preservation on the part of the state? He specifies that the people's entertainment must be without scandal or indecency: what now should be said when political leaders, seeking

to preserve the perceived interest of the state, turn to criticize movies for offending these canons—as in June 1995 when Bob Dole, candidate for the upcoming US presidential election, accused the US entertainment industry of flooding the country with "nightmares of depravity." Examples given by Dole of movies falling under this rubric were Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (from an original idea by Quentin Tarantino), and *True Romance*, Quentin Tarantino's smash hit prior to *Pulp Fiction*. Are we seeing a betrayal on the part of cinema of the moral-political role envisioned for it by Smith; that it has so grown in power that it is turned from ally to subverter of state control? To put the question in aesthetic terms, are we now witnessing a celebration, an entertainment, that signals a reversion to undifferentiated violence that is at least as "unmodern" as any religious fanaticism? Has the remedy of a mass aesthetic, promoted "without violence," turned against the hand of modernity into a self-defeating weapon of extreme violence?

It is important to seek a more decisive interpretation of the power that would permit cinema to do this. If Smith is right, that "publick diversions" are born out of a need to displace the influence of religious sects, which are themselves a substitute for the forces of traditional community in a local (rural) setting, then is it not implied that the aesthetic of mass entertainment, and then most especially the cinema, has had freighted upon it a role of transcendence constitutive of social identity and spiritual meaning as such? This, I think, is no flight of fancy. First of all the numbers speak to the imposing social presence of cinema. At a time when the rent and sale of videos allow millions to watch both old and recent-release movies in the comfort of their own homes, and cable and satellite TV offer major feature films all day and night long, the numbers of people going to the cinema in the US is at its highest for any year since 1959. The Motion Picture Association of America gave the figures at the beginning of March this year: 1.34 billion tickets were sold in 1996, with the average person age 12 and over going to the movies 8.1 times in that year (*USA Today* 1). It seems that video, rather than depleting cinema audiences, now actually increases commitment to first-run movie going. Videos build familiarity with stars, directors, favorite movies genres etc., producing a seamless weave of movie-awareness and sustained aesthetic response. Taken together, exposure to videos, cable, satellite and cinema certainly means that the number of movies watched far exceeds anything in the heyday of cinema-going immediately after World War II.

Cinema moreover is thematically aware of its own ambiguous role. Films like Robert Altman's *The Player*, and Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies and Videotape* set out to portray the dense imbrication of movies and real life in

which people often succumb to a confusion of the two, with both absurd and deadly results. In *The Player* the movies constitute a series of successful lies built upon real murder which they conspire to deny. In *Sex, Lies and Videotape* erotic fixation with objects presented by and on the video screen is finally thrown over, but in a catharsis of desire mediated crucially by the camera itself. A more comic treatment of the same confusion, but with a serious underside, is Van Sant's *To Die For*. Here immortal words are spoken by the aspiring TV personality, Suzanne Stone, who also commits murder in pursuit of her ambition. She says, "You're not anybody in America unless you're on TV. On TV is where we learn about who we really are. Because what's the point of doing anything worthwhile if nobody's watching. And if people are watching it makes you a better person." It would be difficult to formulate more succinctly than this loaded phrase the sanctifying, ordering function of the screen media, phantasmally replacing the constitutive gaze of the rural village. "If people are watching it makes you a better person."[1]

The two movies which provide the immediate background here seem, however, to move to a deeper level still. Rather than simply an ironic reflection of the social forces intermeshed in movies and the making of movies, they seem deliberately to bring cinema to a state of crisis that suggests an inherent fragility and danger in Adam Smith's second remedy. Once modernity has accorded the role of remedy to the movies it has perhaps released a genie that is impossible to cork back in the bottle, and which must progressively manifest a mind of its own. The background comforting notion that entertainment is *all the same* a secondary cultural function, a purely pleasant and dispensable imitation and catharsis, probably relies on a reading of Aristotle's *Poetics* that takes place within an intact sacred order, in the Girardian sense (See *Violence and the Sacred* 292). In other words so long as society depends on other forces than the aesthetic for its strength and coherence it is possible to enjoy aesthetic experience without progressing to a level of crisis. However, once an

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[1]It is almost a commonplace of US popular culture that real events can be described as "like the movies," and sometimes this imitation of art by life reaches a pitch where the two are indistinguishable on an immediate level of perception. A bank robbery in North Hollywood, California on February 28th this year, ending in the deaths of the two bank robbers and injuries to 11 policemen and 6 civilians, is compared by *Rolling Stone* magazine with a sequence from the film *Heat*, starring Robert De Niro. Events on that California morning are described as follows: "Cops shoot out the tires. Emil drives wobbily on, Larry walking in front of the bumper, on point, laying down covering fire. Motorists driving by wonder whether a movie is being shot—perhaps a sequel to *Heat*, a movie that featured a day-light shootout between cops and bank robbers on the streets of L.A.; *everything looks so real*" (*Rolling Stone*, June 26, 1997; my italics).

option is made to rely on the aesthetic for a society's symbolic coherence then can the abyss be far behind? Will the pathos, the suffering and violence connected with drama, be kept in bounds?

Walter Benjamin spoke of the "abyss of aestheticism," in respect of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, meaning that here art moves into the center of existence and the human being becomes art's appearance rather than its ground, something given illusory representation rather than being the true political subject and theme of art's formations.[2] But Benjamin also analyzed the role of cinema in modernity, and saw it as having a positive historical role. This is brought about by the technical versatility of the camera in its ability to break up natural continuities and transform space and time into new rhythms, tempi, angles and proximities. For him "forms that are becoming crucial to our era lie concealed in machines," and nowhere more intensively than in film and camera.[3] Modern aesthetics are therefore an issue of perception, rather than a Nietzschean insistence on appearance. Moreover visual perception is replaced by the tactile, as the dominant sense of the distracted masses of modernity, and realized most acutely in the cinematic medium. Further again, rather than mere touch the closeness effected by cinema is compared to a kind of surgical intervention, by which the lens and with it the audience cuts "deeply into the tissue of the given situation."[4] Thus is gained an awareness of space and spatial structure previously beyond human perception. What is generated is a form of revolutionary practice, in which the technical tools of humanity, as a mode of anthropological materialism, progressively transform the givenness of human experience. The essential "alienation" that would seem to be experienced by acting in or watching a movie is overcome through a productive assimilation of the power of this machine. "[A] liberated use of the

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[2] *Gesammelte Schriften* (hereafter *G. S.*) 1.1 (281-282). Quoted in Rainer Nägele, *Theater, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity* (110).

[3] From *Passagen-Werk* ("The Arcades Project", *G. S.* V, 217). Quoted in Norbert Bolz and Willem Van Reijen, *Walter Benjamin* (75). For Benjamin film's ability to be reproduced (along with photography and copying media in general) grounds its broad historical effect of detaching art from domination by "aura," which is a phenomenon of "presence" as well as "distance," and connected to ancient roots of tradition and ritual. Technical reproduction means that copies take over from the unique existence (of the work of art), and they come to meet the beholder and listener in his or her own situation. Film, therefore, has a demythologizing impact on traditional meanings of art and helps precipitate a new mode of being human. See "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Benjamin's *Illuminations* (217-251).

[4] From *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (The Origin of German Tragic Drama, *G.S.* 1, 458). Quoted in Bolz and Reijen, *Walter Benjamin* (76).

new media and technologies will be possible only when they are adopted as natural forms of being-in-the world" (Bolz and Reijen 75).

From a Benjaminian point of view, therefore, the structure of cinematic experience as an essentially modern phenomenon, far from threatening the loss of human self-understanding, and resulting chaos, offers indeed a new, transformed self-vision, entirely appropriate to the disjunctive, shocking world in which we live. Thus films like *Natural Born Killers* and *Pulp Fiction* (hereafter, *NBK* and *PF*) would demonstrate both the historical logic of Adam Smith's insight and *then* its revolutionary potential. Once we construct a view in terms of material history the prospect of a Nietzschean aesthetic apocalypse will be overcome. My initial metaphor of a cinematic planetary envelope is complemented by Benjamin's concept of "the glass house," the revolutionary contradiction of the bourgeois *intérieur* (both spatial and psychical), already anticipated in the glass and steel constructions of modernism, and paralleled by the public "image space" (*Bildraum*) in which private interiority is abolished and the collective body of political materialism appears. Benjamin said, "To live in the glass house is a revolutionary virtue par excellence;"[5] to which we might gloss, "And the TV and Multiplex are its frame extending to the whole globe." The violence of films like *NBK* and *PF* could be read in this perspective as revolutionary fulfillment of the surgical force of the camera, allowing us to smash the cozy interiors of capitalist dream-sleep, the bourgeois mythos of natural interiority.[6] The intensely violent characters portrayed would also be redeemed by Benjamin's endorsement of the historically necessary "destructive character."

> The destructive character is young and cheerful. For destruction rejuvenates in clearing away the traces of our own age; it cheers because everything cleared away means to the destroyer a complete reduction, indeed eradication, of his own condition.... The destructive character is always blithely at work. It is nature that dictates his tempo, indirectly at least, for he must forestall her. Otherwise she will take over the

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[5]*G.S.* II, 1 (298). Quoted by Nägele (72). For *Bildraum*, where "proximity looks at itself out of its own eyes," see page 74, from *G.S.* II.1 (309).

[6]Benjamin would also seem to suggest this: "Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling." From "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (236).

destruction herself.... No vision inspires the destructive
character. He has few needs, and the least of them is to know
what will replace what has been destroyed.... No moment can
know what the next will bring. What exists he reduces to
rubble, not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way
leading through it. (Benjamin 1978, 301-303)

This could be read as a philosophical manifesto for our two movies.
However, *NBK* and *PF* at the last moment do seem to need some vision of
what will replace the destruction. *NBK* gives us the image of the killers
founding a new human community in their idealized nuclear family heading
into the sun. And in *PF* one of the possible outcomes includes the same myth
of a new beginning, with the young couple liberated afresh for each other by
the (now) benign forces of murder. The American dream of the inviolable
family unit still rules these movies, rather than any proletarian vision of a
collective body. In the Benjaminian hermeneutic, therefore, these movies
should finally be accounted as counter-revolutionary. But does it matter? On
one level Benjamin's analysis of the "tactile" quality of screen media must
surely be warranted by their ability to shock, to breach visual distance by the
violence of the images. The bloody sequence of the outset of mass-murder in
NBK, with the young man delivering meat and then beating, drowning and
burning the young woman's father and mother, overwhelms our senses with a
riot of broken bodies, relationships and the world in which they subsist. In *PF*
the hysterical scene in which the beautiful wife of the mob boss is brought
back from a narcotic coma by a syringe of adrenalin delivered straight to the
heart both disrupts serious involvement with the characters and allows us to
follow the image-montage as it moves to penetrate the life-core of the woman's
body. The red dot made by the magic marker on the woman's breast-bone
draws the spectator deeply into the woman's body and yet in a modality
composed entirely by surfaces. On the one hand, the dissolving of the
difference of depth and surface is an aesthetic realization of immediacy and
therefore a triumph of visual violence. On the other, the back and forth
movement of the camera and the disjointed repartee of the actors
simultaneously create and interrupt the surface, and so undermine the
possibility of "seriously" connecting with the violence. Thus the cinematic act
appears as undecidable (and, therefore, non-accountable), between real
violence (depth) and pure phantasy/comedy (surface).

This elusive mixture of perception and violence must then lead us to a
further response out of Benjamin's aesthetic of the cinema. What comes first,

the revolutionary disruption of the bourgeois world effected by the technology of the camera, or violence itself translated to the screen? If Benjamin's Marxist utopia is no longer historically viable or even interesting, surely his intuition of the "destructive" function of cinema at the level of perception remains valid. What then is at stake is much less destruction for the sake of historically determined revolution, but destruction itself in its endlessly versatile manifestations. In which case we are suddenly very close to the Girardian hypothesis of generative violence and its constitutive role in human culture. In particular Girard's concept of a "sacrificial crisis" provides a supple and revealing analytic. This is the condition in which a sacred order, founded on the resolution of mimetic conflict through scapegoating and sacrifice, emerges into renewed crisis due to the very violence, and so inherent instability, of that solution. In this situation it progressively destroys the differences it once had created, and so develops a greater and greater potential for violence amid a frenzied search for a new sacred beginning. According to Girard, "The phrase 'modern world' seems almost like a synonym for 'sacrificial crisis,'" and yet at the same time this world has perfected methods for sustaining itself "precariously" in the midst of this very crisis.[7] Adam Smith's second remedy must of course be counted as a paramount example of such techniques. The question then becomes, to what extent is the refined ambivalence of cinema ("real violence or pure phantasy") able to sustain itself amid the progressive nature of the crisis. How is cinema able to fulfill a role intuited for it in different registers by Smith and Benjamin, i.e. contain violence by releasing it, suppress the political reality of violence by expressing it perceptually,

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[7]*Violence and the Sacred* (188; see also 238). It should be noted that Benjamin is aware of the founding force of violence for all epochs of history; see his distinction of "lawmaking violence" and "divine violence". The former is constitutive of all society to this point but is inherently prone to collapse. The latter looks forward to absolute revolutionary violence. "A gaze directed only at what is close at hand can at most perceive a dialectical rising and falling in the lawmaking and law-preserving formations of violence. The law governing their oscillation rests on the circumstance that all law-preserving violence, in its duration, indirectly weakens the lawmaking violence represented by it, through the suppression of hostile counter-violence.... This lasts until either new forces or those earlier suppressed triumph over the hitherto lawmaking violence and thus found a new law, destined in its turn to decay. On the breaking of this cycle maintained by mythical forms of law, on the suspension of law with all the forces on which it depends as they depend on it, finally on the abolition of state power, a new historical epoch is founded" (*Reflections* 293-300). But see also "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (*Illuminations* 241-242), where Benjamin describes what he sees as the essentially fascist phenomenon of war as the supreme aesthetic. Congruent with politics of this sort is the reversion of cinema to "ritual values."

neutralize its offense by realizing it as phantasm? How far can cinema maintain its constitutive fiction of "unreal" killing?

On the one hand it would seem to me that the modern world (and the postmodern gesture of reflexivity about the modern) see themselves at least in principle as endlessly self-perpetuating. The very discovery of undecidability in expressive media like the cinema appears to suggest a *per saecula saeculorum* quality, something that will go on for ever cycling a closed phantasmal loop. In other words, art and particularly cinema as perpetual dream. However, if there is even one atom of real violence in cinema, if integral forces of human violence are in any way called on by the camera, then the real world cannot be impervious to it, and vice versa. From a Girardian perspective one could say that in as much as cinema offers even a phantasmal sacrificial resolution then it must immediately be part of a generalized sacrificial crisis of the society in which it exists. More precisely, if encounter with a blood-spattered screen spreads a weak (aesthetic) film of violent catharsis around the night in which it is watched, and perhaps the following day, then it must act ambivalently both to resolve real crisis and provoke it further.

This may almost be a definition of the insubstantial, ozone-layer-thin aesthetic solutions left to the modern world against unlimited violence. The function of cinema in this sense way would also explain why the face of violence in movies gets progressively more monstrous: it must continually outdo a crisis of violence it itself helps to unfold. Movies like the *Alien* series, *Jurassic Park, Twister, Volcano, Independence Day* project the fault onto natural or extraterrestrial causes, a thoroughly mythical move. But behind this face—according to the interchangeability of cultural and natural catastrophe in sacrificial crisis—there is the sense of real social dissolution. One feels the barely-contained forces of alienation, poverty, hunger, crime and militancy beneath the surface of these movies, along with the sacred fascination these forces themselves exert. Overall these disaster movies reflect the always-imminent collapse of a symbolic order irretrievably cut loose from any ultimate ground—and at the same moment the infinite capacity of the sacred to regenerate itself by displacing and multiplying itself at the symbolic level. As sacrificial solutions are always already "fictional" then the production of infinite fictions seems to play the same role as a single founding fiction.

However, as we have already remarked, the two movies of our special interest, *NBK* and *PF*, are distinguished by a movement to bring the rolling crisis to the point of explicit presentation. These movies are virtually crisis *as* entertainment. *NBK* sets out a brutal thesis about the media. The killers are co-

opted by TV news reporters as instant sensation, quickly approaching the status of media-stars themselves. The killer himself critiques the media for changing violence into a reported phenomenon, like the weather. It is not left at a local level, experienced as a *natural* phenomenon, but awareness of it is spread across the continent by media coverage. As such it is cut loose from its own reality and rendered unnaturally harmful. It is the task of him and his female companion to restore violence to its natural purity. In the earlier child-abuse-as-comedy-show and later, in the jokey, manic quality of the prison riot, there is a truly grotesque display of the abolition of all difference wrought by the screen media: differences within the family, differences between authority and criminal, between serious and insane, between bad and good, all are brought to confusion. Screen media is shown bluntly as the provocateur of violence. But *NBK* heads toward a classic sacrificial resolution, with the execution of the central media figure. One individual is destroyed who is symbolic of all the monstrous violence the media unleashes; after that there is a benign new beginning. As such *NBK* appears to look for a resolution against undecidability. In this reading it is a deeply reactionary, "fundamentalist movie," seeking a programmatic closure through transcendent "natural" violence.

PF's presentation is much more subtle. Its narrative technique of running three or four stories in parallel, the formal sadism and/or extreme violence of the stories, and its broken time frame—with the chronological middle of the sequence of episodes forming the film's end—together, all of this confirms the analysis above of an equivalence of surface and depth. Stories themselves are pulp, infinitely disposable. Horrific imaginal violence is mixed indistinguishably with humor, interesting conversation, reasonable judgment and even forgiveness. Time and its arrow, with its clarity of beginning and end, end and beginning, this is bent back on itself and rendered ironic, unsafe for analysis. You can take what you like from this film: cruelty, absurdity, hilarity, conversion, or a sense of being totally manipulated. The general key to the film's clamorous success is the way in which audiences are always "in the know," always given the option both to identify with the action and remove from it without pain, to connect with the most gruesome violence and to brush it away as self-detaching dry skin. However, once we step outside the shifting frames of the movie itself and view it within a broader analysis such as presented here, another conclusion is possible. This movie exposes the threadbare nature of the sacrificial resolutions attempted by most other movies, and as such it contributes to the general significant exhaustion of this sacrificial logic. At the same time, however, it fulfills Smith's mandate for

"publick diversions" almost to the letter, for it renders audiences once again safe from alienation by constructing an aesthetic *out of the collapse of the aesthetic*. It places audiences in the abyss and makes it fun. This is why *PF* is hailed by cinema critics as a success while *NBK* is seen as a mess. *PF* rescues the aesthetics of cinema *in extremis*. It testifies to the enormous adaptability of the creative media, and their ability to continue to help maintain the course of modernity in the midst of crisis. It convinces audiences that they are superior to the crisis even as it plunges them in deeper.

But crisis remains. Undecidability does not change the nature of the dice even as it keeps them in perpetual motion. According to a theory of generative violence perception itself, or more precisely the phenomenal, is already ruled intimately by the sacred origins of culture, the production of a symbolic order through the surrogate victim. To dissolve differences, beginning/end, surface/depth, is to invite a return to primordial crisis, albeit in the apparent form of festival, of cinema-as-festival.[8] More generally, the presence of alternative cinematic solutions in the two movies we are discussing itself suggests the instability of the situation. Violence remains at the heart of *PF*, and the film itself seems to recognize this by deliberately falsifying the ending and so deflecting the nihilism of that ending. More significant still, within the false ending it suddenly generates an utterly new solution, a non violent transcendence provoked by the claimed experience of a miracle. The conversation between the two hit-men changes from the nature of meat, which types are clean or dirty to eat,[9] to the possibility of intervention by God in human life. This is a serious conversation, with a refined epistemology of miracle ("what is significant (is) I felt the touch of God"), but no one has to take this seriously precisely because it is enshrined in a false ending. It is a dream utopia, and utopia as denouement. As the hit-men saunter from the

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[8]Film in fact lacks the episodic form of traditional festival. It moves to a stage which may be idealized as "permanent festival." My argument here is that sustained sacrificial crisis is a more accurate account.

[9]It is remarkable how pivotal the trope of excreta is in the film. Blood becomes "shit" to be cleaned from the car. Pork is not to be eaten because the pig lives in its own excrement. The biblical recitation is "cold-blooded shit" to quote prior to executing a victim. Vince, who in the false ending remains "unrepentant", dies on the toilet just after defecating. The heirloom watch which is the immediate cause of Vince's death and a main hinge in the narrative was concealed for five years in the recta of two prisoners-of-war. Thus the watch as a talisman of the axial history of violence in the 20th century (two World Wars, and Vietnam) also doubles as human feces. The ubiquitous layer of excreta in the film, and its metonymic value as blood and death, is a (de)symbol of terminal sacrificial crisis, the loss of primary human difference, with evident world-historical reference.

miraculous scene of achieved peace we cannot forget that one of them is already dead.

We are perhaps left then with a fresh level of undecidability. Can forgiveness be real, can it overcome violence, can someone truly change "water into wine," make the impossible possible? Not only, therefore, in this reading do we have the salvation of modernity through aesthetics, as opposed to a new (counter)revolutionary foundation through "natural" violence, but a third option seems to emerge out of the very debris scattered around in both solutions, the debris left by a sheer excess of violence, by its own ultimate implausibility, whether revolutionary or aesthetic. Forgiveness seems to appear in this film as neither an aesthetic, nor a foundation. It arises literally out of nowhere. When Jules, the "transitional" criminal, gives the petty thief who has just held up the restaurant the contents of his wallet he says he is "buying a life" with this gift. At another time he would have killed him. This abyssal "exchange," giving someone money in order that you might not demand his life, interrupts all previous "cultural" bargains based on mimetic rivalry, an eye for an eye, a life for a life. A sheer gift somehow "purchases" the whole situation, without any one figure in the relationship of violent rivalry being paid off. It redeems everything, including itself, or nothing at all. As such it can have no starting point other than the eruption of the moment. Perhaps we could say that forgiveness is the abyss of the abyss. It has no real aesthetic, for it cannot concretize in any detail behind which lurks the fascination of violence. It is rather the absence of the concrete detail, or again rather the space between the details (between the bullet holes on the wall!) where something radically new may be "perceived" to arise.

Into both competing solutions, therefore, messianic violence or undecidable violence, forgiveness intrudes itself as a mysterious third. The massive, self-contradictory aesthetic of film continues to effect Smith's remedy: and in movies like *PF* its very self-contradictions appear to sustain it, so far! It is the way of the world, as described by Paul of Tarsus when two millennia ago he said the world in its present form is passing away.... (I Cor 7:13). Into this world, including the movie *PF*, forgiveness appears as more groundless than the violence it interrupts. It does not smash Benjamin's "glass cage" and with it the panoptic screen of the movies. Rather, into the amazing, terrifying combination of tensility and fragility that upholds modernity it seems to enter and recommend itself. The more unbearable the tensions of that combination get, perhaps the greater will become the urgency of its self-recommendation and power of its elusive intrusion. Or will the aesthetic apocalypse continue to unroll, simultaneously expanding and exhausting its

repertoire, stretching the tissue of violent images more and more thinly over a paralyzed world? Perhaps these processes are inexorably linked, the undecidability of violence and the undecidability of forgiveness, and in some mysterious way you can't really have one without the other.

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DEAD MAN WALKING:
ON THE CINEMATIC TREATMENT
OF LICENSED PUBLIC KILLING

Edmund Arens
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> I regret that so many people do not understand, but I know that they
> have not watched the state imitate the violence they so abhor.
>
> (Sister Helen Prejean)

Dead Man Walking, the highly acclaimed second film directed by Tim
Robbins, seems appropriate for discussion in the symposium's
context of *Film and Modernity: Violence, Sacrifice and Religion*. This film
on the one hand thematizes different forms of violence and victimization; on
the other hand it presents divergent forms of religion. And it does so in a way
which not only demonstrates the interplay of violence and religion but also
opens up the chance of transcending various kinds of sacrificial structures
inhabiting that interplay.

We can approach *Dead Man Walking* in five steps. After some general
remarks about this film as a work of art, I will briefly review the story line. In
the part called Themes and Topics, I will outline some of the predominant
topics addressed in this movie. The fourth step is devoted to the interrelation
of Violence, Victimization and Redemption. Finally, the religious or
theological question comes into view under the heading of Proximity and
Testimony, an aspect which at the same time has a definite link to law and the
legal system.

I. *Dead Man Walking* as a Work of Art

According to Susan Sontag, film "currently is the most vivid, the most
stimulating, and the most important of all genres of art" (Sontag 13). But

whether a particular film really can be considered as a work of art depends on a number of presuppositions, a few of which I shall mention here. Without going too deeply into the debate on the nature and purpose of aesthetic production, there are at least some requirements which point to a work of art. Roughly speaking, it is defined by putting matter and form into a certain relation, by creating or producing a certain structure, by adopting a certain style and by organizing the material by means of genres (all of which relates to the classical notion of *poesis*). Secondly, a work of art deals with perception in a double way: while it implies a certain perception of reality, it also invites the audience to participate in this perception and thus to deepen, alter, or correct the perception that they experienced (something which relates to *aisthesis*). Thirdly, art aims at having certain emotional effects on the public that are either purifying or edifying (something which since Aristotle has been discussed as *katharsis*). If these three dimensions (cf. Jauss; Siller) are always involved in works of art, we can ask how in *Dead Man Walking* the interplay of *poesis*, *aisthesis*, and *katharsis* is at work.

Under certain conditions a film is a creative work of art. In this case, the motion picture, whether documentary or fictitious, includes an aesthetic creation of an imagined reality. It does not simply mirror reality but always reconstructs or reshapes it. In fictional film narrative, everyday reality is disrupted and rearranged by means of a variety of formal and material techniques. The treatment of reality necessarily involves the question of representation. What Paul Ricoeur considered as decisive for narrative fiction, applies to narrative fiction films as well: they make use of "calculated dissonance" which disrupts everyday reality and thereby points to a "redescription of reality" (Ricoeur 1975; 1976; 1986). We shall see later on how this process, attributed especially to certain metaphors, works in the case of *Dead Man Walking*.

Besides the topic of representation, any kind of art raises the question of perception. Art implies a certain perception and at the same time it offers or invites—in the case of visual art—the audience to perceive reality in a different or deeper manner. In a movie the audience, whether by a manipulative "aesthetics of overwhelming"[1] or by an aesthetics of disclosing, is moved emotionally and imaginatively, the aim being to direct their attention to the secret of the things shown and thus to direct or redirect their view of reality. From the point of view of a pragmatic theory of action (cf. Arens 1994; 1997b) which additionally takes up Ricoeur's most important insights, I would

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[1]The term has been coined by Heiner Müller; quoted from Kirsner 1996, 120.

like to introduce another term, namely *direction*. A film is not only directed by its director; by its genre, style, story, cut, context, performance etc., it shows certain directions; by its particular arrangement of form and content it aims at disclosing different directions. It thereby aims at enabling the audience to direct or redirect their attention to relevant, neglected or decisive aspects or realms of reality. An artistic movie, as Ricoeur has elaborated in the case of narrative fiction, is an appeal to our imagination. By its modes of representation, perception, and direction, it invites us to accept a different perception of everyday life. Whether those directions are offered as a kind of invitation or whether they are forced upon the audience makes a difference in view of the artistic value of the work. Notwithstanding its pragmatic orientation, a work of art has an "open structure" which means that it is open to different readings and to different receptions (cf. Eco; Jauss 1991). Nonetheless, when speaking about direction as an important element in film, we have to keep in mind what Reinhold Zwick writes following Amédée Ayfre: "It's precisely the ambivalence of what is shown, its openness to different modes of reading that is of elementary importance for taking a film seriously even in a theological sense" (110).

Dead Man Walking indeed has to be regarded as a work of art because of its sophisticated interweaving of various genres, because of its style, its techniques, its metaphorical potential, its ability to be read in multiple ways. It qualifies as a work of art finally by its direction of attention and by its stimulating visualization of ethical and theological questions. In this regard, Tim Robbin's movie exhibits what Inge Kirsner's claim that "film presents itself as a mini-apocalypse which confronts the viewer with 'first things' and 'last things'" (258; cf. Larcher).

In terms of its genre *Dead Man Walking* can be defined by its main locality as a prison film. More than half of the time its "mise en scène" (cf. Bazin) takes place in a prison, namely in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, at Angola, Louisiana. But whereas in prison films what we are usually shown are the possibility, planning, and practice of escape, this movie refers to the topic of escape only in a metaphorical way. One of its subjects is the moral question of escape from responsibility.

A prison film in terms of its main location, *Dead Man Walking* at the same time contains some elements of a court room film. An important sequence where the convicted murderer and the father of one victim confront each other for the first time during the film takes place in a court room, at the Louisiana Pardon Board. During the entire film, judges and lawyers, victims

and witnesses are involved at different stages as the movie continually relates to questions of law and justice.

From the perspective of the second leading character, the nun Sr. Helen Prejean, who by her autobiographic reportage novel called *Dead Man Walking* provided the raw material, the story, and the title of the movie, this film at the same time has an autobiographical dimension. This is true even if it covers only a few months in her life; they nonetheless became a turning point in her activities. And of course the film thereby introduces the question of religion, a topic that is both verbally and visually thematized in a host of topics, images, metaphors and moods.

Whether *Dead Man Walking* not only deals with religion but in fact can be viewed as a religious film is a question which I shall be address in the course of my discussion. Anyway, the discussion of genre already points to the fact that it is open to different readings, possibly including a religious or even theological one.

The style of this movie can probably best be described as "aesthetisized realism."[2] Its topics are "real things": rape, murder, trial, prison, the death penalty, and execution, all of which are presented quite naturalistically and sometimes even drastically. Furthermore, the scenario includes real places, for instance the New Orleans housing project where Helen Prejean lived and worked. The film shows some real inhabitants of that area.[3] Nevertheless, from the very beginning this movie transgresses any plain realism. It engages a metaphorical process which makes use of a "calculated introduction of dissonance" (Andrew 167). It is precisely the symbol and metaphor of the cross which introduces such dissonance. The cross Sr. Helen wears at her neck makes the metal detector ring[4] when she enters Angola State Prison to serve as a spiritual adviser of a murderer sentenced to death. As this short sequence already indicates, a lot of dissonance, disruption, or interruption (cf. Arens 1997c) of the usual way things work will follow, until the finale where the symbol of the cross reappears in a highly aesthetisized manner. Here, it once more implies a "calculated introduction of dissonance," this time into the process of so-called "humane," seemingly clinical-clean execution by lethal injection.

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[2] Cf. the typology of "religious films" in Zwick (99-106).

[3] Reported at a screening of "Dead Man Walking" on November 25, 1996, at the American Academy of Religion annual convention in New Orleans.

[4] This detail, so important for the metaphorical process of the film, is absent from H. Prejean's book.

II. The Story

Sister Helen Prejean (played by Susan Sarandon) is a member of the religious order of St. Joseph of Medaille. She does social and educational work in a New Orleans ghetto, where she lives in Hope House right among the black poor. One day she is asked to answer the letter of a convicted murderer awaiting his execution in Louisiana State Prison. She writes back and after a while she accepts Matthew Poncelet´s invitation to visit him on death row where he has been imprisoned for six years. Poncelet (played by Sean Penn) tries to convince her that although he was present at the crime, the actual murder of two teenagers for which he earned the death sentence had been done by his accomplice. Even if the nun has doubts about Poncelet´s truthfulness, she supports the prisoner in his legal fight against execution. Together with a lawyer hired by her congregation the convict appeals to the New Orleans Pardon Board. There he encounters the families of the victims, the Delacroixs and the Percys, who urge the board that justice be done and the murderer be killed. Actually the court decides that "clemency be denied." The time for the execution is fixed and the time table towards the lethal injection is set and adhered to.

Instead of the ordinary prison chaplain, Sr. Prejean is asked by Matthew Poncelet to become his spiritual adviser on his way to death. As a consequence of her agreement to do so the nun not only experiences an intimidating closeness to the convict; as he also comes into contact with the two families of the victims. She is haunted by their pain but is nevertheless unwilling to "come to their side." Such a step from the perspective of the victims' families would require that, instead of accompanying the murderer, she console those who cry for relief and redemption from their brutally disrupted life, a redemption they precisely expect from Poncelet's execution.

Sr. Prejean also contacts Poncelet's family, who belong to the white subproletariat. At their home she is privy to the humiliating life conditions of his mother and family who are discriminated against in manifold ways. The sister thus becomes aware of the fact that not only in her New Orleans ghetto surroundings but also in white areas living conditions exist where the seeds of crime have been sown from early childhood by way of the experience of misery and despair.

After all appeals to clemency have been turned down, it is Sr. Prejean's task to prepare Poncelet for death. Over and over again she asks him to tell the truth and to take the responsibility for what he did. Poncelet at her last visit finally confesses that he killed the boy. He dies by lethal injection in the face of Sr. Prejean and the fathers of the two victims whom he asks for forgiveness,

while outside the prison pro- and anti-capital punishment demonstrators hold vigils for the victims they refer to.

The film closes with Poncelet's burial at the nuns' cemetery presided over by the local bishop and attended by Mr. Delacroix with whom in the final sequence Sr. Prejean is shown in a church praying the rosary.

III. Themes and Topics

As the ambiguous genre of *Dead Man Walking* already indicates, this movie oscillates between a prison and a court room film, as it deals with the subject matters of law and justice. Indeed, the American legal system is one of its main topics and targets. Tim Robbins's motion picture quite realistically shows the current procedures and practice of the death penalty especially in its supposedly "humane" form of lethal injection, a method currently practiced in more and more American states. It does so by unfolding the story of one particular Louisiana criminal, concentrating on the last weeks before his execution.[5] It shows the manifold legal actions that are performed on one side to put the sentenced murderer to death, on the other side to save the convict's life.

Dead Man Walking illustrates quite impressively who actually gets to the death chamber: an uneducated poor cajun outcast whose degraded family conditions led him on the path toward crime. Confronted with a highly complicated legal system, he simply cannot compete with it intellectually and financially and thus easily is sentenced to death. The film shows the main character, Matthew Poncelet, as an aggressive, nasty racist, to whom the term "monster" is applied by the parents of the victims.

The film presents the controversial topic of capital punishment in a highly differentiated manner. The juridical and practical procedures are shown in detail; the competing interest groups and parties involved are taken seriously. Thus, without denouncing any party, the political interest in capital punishment and the political reward of a death sentence for a governor or a district attorney seeking reelection come into view. The perspective of the

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[5] The story of Matthew Poncelet is in fact an artistic, that is, at times altered, at times condensed and stylizised adaption of the story of the convicted murderer Patrick Sonnier told in Sr. Helen Prejean's autobiographical reportage novel *Dead Man Walking*. Sonnier actually was put to death in the electric chair at Louisiana State Prison on April 5, 1984. This instrument of execution was used in Louisiana until 1990. Robbins, the author of the script and director of the film, includes elements of a second story of the book portraying a racist, aggressive murderer named Robert Willie, a delinquent Sr. Prejean also accompanied as a spiritual adviser. He died in the electric chair on December 28, 1984.

relatives of victims whose unbearable loss makes them press for justice and relief is portrayed in impressive images and words. As the film indicates, the experience of face-to-face "evidence" of capital crime can convert former opponents of the death penalty to becoming its supporters. Another aspect shown very vividly is the fierce public battle about capital punishment, a battle which is stimulated by the media and led by activist groups for and against it. The film further illustrates that the question of capital punishment is a highly controversial subject in the US. It is linked to all kinds of industries and businesses, playing a highly visible and lucrative role in the media industry (cf. Trombley; Arens 1992).

The general theme of the death penalty is exemplified most concretely by a minute presentation of life and time on death row. On the one hand, the time-table of an execution is illustrated by the exact and emotionless preparations made by the prison staff who simply do their jobs in what looks like a technical procedure. On the other hand, the convict's desperate and at times delusive fight for survival and then his preparations for the approaching execution are elucidated.

Beneath the surface of the different opinions about how justice shall be done, the topic of violence emerges as a main concern of the film. *Dead Man Walking* unveils a manifold of open and of hidden violence. First of all, in a number of verbal descriptions and continuously more precise flash-backs it points to the brutal physical violence done to the two adolescent victims of rape and murder. Secondly, it shows the tremendous and long lasting psychic violence experienced by the parents of murdered children, of whom a newspaper headline that is faded in tells: "Parents' grief never ends." Thirdly, the movie makes us aware of the psychological violence inflicted upon the family members of the convict, who once more become the object of public hatred and media persecution. Fourthly, *Dead Man Walking* vividly portrays the psychological and physical violence done to the convict, a violence legitimated by means of juridical appeals to retributive justice, to public security, and the need of capital punishment as a deterrence. Over and over again, the motive of vengeance reemerges, as an matter of both religious and secular motivation.

Dead Man Walking is a film about capital punishment as public licensed killing. It presents the different strategies and practices of either legitimating or rejecting this kind of law and the concept of justice implied by it.

Religion too plays a significant role in dealing with the death penalty. Of course, this film is directly concerned with religion, as exemplified in the life and action of the Louisiana nun Sr. Helen Prejean. Actually though, a short

period of her life, the time of her first encounter with life on death row, is dramatized. The film tells about the spiritual guidance she gives to a convicted murderer and about the insights she thereby gains into the interconnections of being a poor criminal and being sentenced to death, of justice and politics, of victimization and hatred, of religion and vengeance. By her attention to a despised "monster," she becomes aware of the multiple shapes of violence and victimization. While her own behavior suggests the liberating and redeeming power of religion, she and the audience at the same time are confronted by another religious option, personified in a representative of institutionalized religion, the prison chaplain. In fact, it is fair to say that *Dead Man Walking* includes a struggle about religion which involves symbols and metaphors, and symbolic and ordinary actions, and which is also waged by means of Biblical references and theological concepts.

Thus the topic of the interconnection between justice and religion, or better, between violence and religion emerges as an essential dimension of *Dead Man Walking*. As I mentioned at the beginning of my presentation, this interconnection makes the film appropriate to the thematics of our symposium.

IV. Violence, Victimization, and Redemption

Dead Man Walking is a film on public as well as religiously licensed killing. Such killing within a legal framework is viewed from one side as legitimate vengeance which is necessary not only to maintain public order and to deter possible criminals, but also to help the families of the victims find psychic relief. This public and religiously licensed killing thus is held up as performing a healing or redemptive function. Knowing that those who raise the sword are killed by the sword should contribute to spiritual peace, particularly for those who are mostly concerned by the loss of their beloved ones; at the same time a public peace, broken by any brutal murder, is restored. Such killing, according to the relatives of the victims, and to members of the prison staff, including the prison chaplain, is even sanctioned by divine command: "eye for eye" (Exodus 21:24).

The sketchily defined prison chaplain[6] is the foremost representative of a form of religion acting in accordance with the execution process. This form of religion regards its task to be the preparation of the convict for death by offering him the sacraments of the church, thus caring for the eternal fate of the soul. It is an otherwordly, ritualistic kind of religion; it conceives of

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[6] In H. Prejean's book (89-90, 181-82) he is identified, after remaining unnamed for a while, as chaplain Penton.

redemption in terms of preservation from hell. As the behavior of the prison chaplain indicates, such religion is impersonal, distanced, and driven by the concept of God as Supreme Judge. This mode of religion, which in the film is referred to as that of the Old Testament,[7] is confronted by a religious practice inspired by the example of Jesus. The first shape of religion, in terms of certain dialogues and images of the film, can be read as sacrificial. It is closely linked to the support of capital punishment. While the death penalty reproduces the circle of violence and continues to produce victims, sacrificial religion sanctions and even sanctifies such victimization. Indeed, like capital punishment itself (cf. McBride), it can be read as following the pattern of scapegoating by arbitrarily choosing[8] a surrogate victim; it can be regarded as a kind of *mimesis* and as a manifestation of *sacred violence* (Girard 1977; 1986; Schwager; Hamerton-Kelly 1992).

As Sr. Prejean explicitly underlines in her book, governmental, legal violence imitates criminal violence and thus continues the circle of violence instead of breaking away from it.[9] Tim Robbins also clearly indicates the mimetic structure of "rationally controlled vengeance" (Hamerton-Kelly 1992, 33; cf. Verdier; Jacoby). Indeed, it preserves elements of the sacrificial system and in its utmost form of capital punishment it is a manifestation of sacred violence. In order to show this, the film adopts a sacral style. According to Naomi Green, such a style, which was typical for Pasolini's films, can be characterized by the following elements: first of all, frontality is frequently

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[7] There are, I think, no anti-Jewish undertones here; they are entirely absent from and even rejected in H. Prejean's book. There is even a strong hint in the film that questions the simple opposition of OT and NT religion. We must be careful not to confront a uniform OT religion oriented toward "law and order" and sanctioning killing with a presumed NT religion of love and forgiveness. That such an opposition is unwarranted is evident in the prison chaplain's appeal to the NT text of Romans 13 and in the nun's reference to and reading from the OT text of Isaiah 43.

[8] The arbitrariness is due to the fact that about 25,000 killings take place in the USA each year, but an average number of "only" 30 murderers are actually executed in the course of the same period, depending on a number of almost incalculable factors. Most of those executed come from among poor and uneducated members of racial and social minorities. While an execution rate of about 30 per year may be considered as relatively low and even negligible compared to China or Iran, most of us would not consider those countries as fully civilized societies, whereas most of us consider the US to be one. Cf. Prejean, ch. 3, especially footnote 20 (252-3).

[9] Cf. Prejean, referring to Albert Camus' reflections on the guillotine: "Camus addresses the moral contradiction inherent in a polity which imitates the violence it claims to abhor..."(40). She remarks further: "I regret that so many people do not understand, but I know that they have not watched the state imitate the violence they so abhor" (109).

used, that is, the main characters are often shown face front. In important moments the movements of these characters are composed symmetrically; the characters and their actions are sometimes ritualized by the use of slow motion. Such a sacral style often also concentrates on a few main persons who are positioned right at the center of the screen and who are furthermore isolated from their environment. All of these techniques are especially inhibited in sequences showing Sr. Helen and Poncelet in face-to-face interaction on death row. The sacral style of *Dead Man Walking* is underlined by its use of sacred music, especially the hymn *Sacred Love* played during Poncelet's last walk, and the Pakistani Sufi devotional chanting called Qawwali (performed by Nusrat Fath Ali Khan). The execution is shown as a sophisticated form of *sacred violence* or *ritual killing* (cf. Hamerton-Kelly 1987) above all by representing it as a mode of crucifixion. This in fact continues the dissonance introduced by the sister's cross in the beginning; it alludes to the sacrificial dynamic of the death penalty and at the same time it exposes the seemingly clinical procedure of "humane" capital punishment by lethal injection as murderous. In this way, the film of course exceeds the realistic framework: in the death chamber, Poncelet is tied on a stretcher with a cruciform shape. Before the lethal poison is injected into his arm, this cross is raised and shown to the witnesses invited to watch the execution. And while the three-step injection takes place, the execution stretcher now horizontally positioned is shown from above, thus underlining once more its shape as an instrument of crucifixion. By flash-back images the process of legally controlled ritual killing runs parallel to the uncontrolled criminal killing done by the convict; and these flash-backs are also shown from above. Thus the mimetic structure of capital punishment is once more highlighted.

What makes *Dead Man Walking* religiously relevant and theologically illuminating is the fact that over against the sacrificial-religious structure of capital punishment, another form of religion is highlighted. This is done by the person and action of Sr. Helen Prejean, who, in lieu of a form of religion driven by the imperative of "eye for an eye" vengeance, confesses to be inspired by the example of Jesus. For this approach, redemption does not consist in the restoration of a damaged public through annihilation of the wrongdoer, but in a long-lasting and painful process of healing. Instead of resorting to institutionalized, professional distance and ritualized care of souls, this form of religion is exercised in terms of participation and proximity. Through intended and performed solidarity with the victims on every side and through painful personal processes of interaction with them, Sr. Prejean aims at disclosing the redemptive and liberating potential of Biblical religion. As

the murderer needs to confront his guilt by taking responsibility for what he did, the victims´ families are in need of liberation from the unbearable burden of their loss and from the accompanying feelings of vengeful hatred.

Dead Man Walking convincingly demonstrates that there are not only different shapes of victimization but that correspondingly distinct religious orientations offer divergent directions for redemption and liberation. Without denouncing its rival orientations, the film clearly opts for the way Sr. Prejean acts and for her Jesuanic or—as I would like to name it—her Christopractical way of dealing with people (cf. Arens 1995). The key words for her approach referring predominantly to the Gospel of John and the Prophets are: *truth, love* and *dignity*.

V. Proximity and Testimony

In Sr. Helen Prejean's person and action a redemptive mode of religion and a healing orientation of action become visible. In her verbal and nonverbal behavior, the concepts of the biblical understanding of *truth, love*, and *dignity* are enacted as participation, proximity, and testimony (cf. Arens 1997a). By her actions Sister Prejean overcomes the institutional distance of professional members of the religious and prison staff and thereby arrives at a proximity in which a "monster" acquires a human face. In face-to-face interaction with the convicted murderer, the difficult, dangerous, and painful path to truth is embarked upon, until finally the murderer avows the crime and confesses the truth: "The boy, Walter, I killed him." It is the first time during the film that Poncelet articulates the name of his victim. In so doing, he ceases to blame his accomplice for the murder, and takes the responsibility for the victim's death. Sr. Prejean replies to Poncelet's confession by affirming: "You did terrible things but you have a dignity now. You are a Son of God." This sequence, in fact, is one of the outstanding turning points of the film. It is characterized once more by a sacral style. In close-up the faces of the two protagonists are shown as separated only by a perforated wall of glass, giving the impression of a confessional. By his confession, Matthew Poncelet, whom the prison chaplain once denounced as "God's mistake," is pronounced a "Son of God". Despite his horrible crimes, he acquired a dignity and a new name. After he confronted and confessed his murderous actions, Sr. Prejean assures him in accordance with the Gospel of John: "The truth has made us free" (John 8:32). The spiritual proximity of the two protagonists is embodied for a very short moment in the prisoner's last walk. After the warden agrees to Poncelet's request that the sister may touch him, she accompanies him on his walk to the death chamber with her hand on this shoulder. While a prison staff member

shouts: "dead man walking," Sr. Prejean reads from Isaiah 43:2: "Do not be afraid... I have called you by your name, you are mine..."

The Bible text once more highlights the interconnection between proximity and participation, between name and redemption. By means of Sr. Prejean's unconditional proximity and participation, Poncelet is able to acknowledge his guilt and to take responsibility for his crimes. It is at this point that both the victims and he himself acquire a name. In the course of this redirection of Poncelet's orientation, the victims' families also change from hated prosecutors into suffering human persons whom he faces in the death chamber, whom he addresses and whom he is able to ask in his last words for forgiveness: "Mr. Delacroix, I ask you for forgiveness. Mr. and Mrs. Percy, I hope you get some relief from my death."[10] At the same time, he voices another conviction, which he shares with Sr. Prejean and the film makers, with his last words on violence, saying: "Killing people is wrong... It makes no difference whether it's citizens, countries, or governments. Killing is wrong" (Prejean 210-1).

The religious quality and the theological relevance of *Dead Man Walking* from my point of view become visible by the sophisticated interplay of what it shows, narrates, and discloses.[11] All of this takes place through its introduction of the metaphorical process centered around the cross and crucifixion, by its mirroring of other religious symbols such as confession and the confessional, and by referring to several important theological dimensions: implicitly as *face, name, proximity, participation,* and *testimony,* and explicitly in biblical and theological terms.

The "prophetic quality"[12] of this film emerges by way of its disclosure or apocalypsis of capital punishment as a quasi-religious "ritual of killing" or a secular liturgy of death; it becomes clear by the representation of proximity as redemptive action: in the unusual proximity which overcomes any kind of professional distance, even a murderer may become the needy and vulnerable "other," for whom I am responsible. Following Levinas,[13] it is precisely in

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[10] The real convict whom Sr. Prejean accompanied, Patrick Sonnier, in his last words asked pardon of the father of the killed boy, but not of the parents of the raped and killed girl, presumably because the girl's step father, Vernon Harvey, had urged that Sonnier be "grilled."

[11] H. Schmitt esteems the theological relevance of this film for the nondogmatic way in which it deals with such issues as guilt, redemption, and human dignity, while at the same time disclosing their meaning in a contemporary, "postchristian public."

[12] I have taken the term from G. Larcher (181), who discovers in artistic films "potential alien prophecies" in view of theology.

[13] See Levinas, and Dirscherl.

proximity that the other prohibits me from any kind of murder and calls me into responsibility, into the ethical relation in which justice is rooted.

The prophetic quality of *Dead Man Walking* is further shown by its introduction of a fascinating—although implicit—anthropology and even theology of the "face" (cf. Levinas; Wohlmuth): it underlines Levinas's most important insight, namely that the face of the other discloses his or her vulnerability and commands not to kill him or her. It is the "epiphany" of the face, especially the "naked" face in all its humility and misery, that prevents murder, including public licenced killing. Does it happen by chance that the face of a convict is hidden before execution? In the epiphany of the face the transcendence of the other becomes visible and "calling." At the same time, the face of the other points to the dimension of encompassing transcendence, that is to the "Other."

This prophetic quality also becomes visible in the film's empathy for the different victims and in its disclosing of multiple victimizations and the various needs of being remembered and rescued; that is why one could even speak of an "aesthetic of redemption" (Wolin; cf. Handelman). Finally, the prophetic quality of this movie comes to cinematic light by its powerful interplay with the acts of witnessing and confessing.

From my perspective, *Dead Man Walking* can be read as an "analogical imagination" (Tracy) of witnessing. To be sure, testimonies and witnesses are involved both in a number of legal procedures and in religious contexts (cf. Arens 1989).[14] Witnessing thus provides a link between law and religion, and indeed, in this film it is dealt with on both levels. Witnesses appear at decisive stages during the film. First, there are the witnesses of the prosecution and of the defense who try to convince the jury of their respective positions on Matthew Poncelet's crime. Secondly, witnessing is alluded to by the female victim's mother who tells about her brother's identification of the girl's body. She reports that in view of the evidence of the abused body, he converted from an opponent to a supporter of the death penalty.[15] Thirdly, witnesses are present at Poncelet's execution, including official representatives of government, the legal system, and relatives of the victims. Fourthly, we have

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[14] According to Levinas, ch. V, by witnessing one takes on one's utmost responsibility for the other while at the same time the majesty of the infinite, that is the Other, is disclosed. Witnessing thus is a mode of "Saying," a performative way to nonreified transcendence.

[15] Cf. Prejean, where a few letters to the editor of different journals are quoted. One of them asks: "... have you witnessed the VICTIM being raped, stabbed, shot, not to mention the agony of the family left behind?" (108).

the type of witness which Ricoeur calls "attestation"[16] and which he links to both being guilty and realizing the call of conscience, precisely when Poncelet confesses his guilt. Fifthly, we, the audience, become a kind of juridical witness ourselves. By means of flash-backs we are able to witness both Poncelet's barbaric murder of the adolescents and the "institutionalized murder"[17] that takes place in his execution.

Finally, we, the audience, become witnesses of a process of spiritual liberation and redemption by the truth that makes people free and responsible. As Tim Robbins seems to suggest, we even witness a kind of new creation. At least one particular action of Sr. Prejean's towards Poncelet in the death chamber, her gesture inside the witness chamber, the stretching of her arm and fingers towards the dying convict, may hint at this interpretation. Sr. Prejean's gesture evokes Michelangelo's Sistine chapel painting of creation in which God gives life to Adam by stretching out his arm.

There is, however, a certain ambivalence that has to be considered here, based on the fact that we, the public, are watching a film in which we become witnesses of an execution. We, who normally have no chance of getting access to this kind of forbidden fare, are enabled by the movie to enter the witness box. This precisely is part of the film's attraction. It allows us to get some voyeuristic satisfaction of watching killing and at the same time it gives us the moral permission to do so by making us public witnesses. *Dead Man Walking* indeed enables us to become morally "justified" spectators of public licensed killing in the electronic age. Most probably, this attraction, satisfaction, and justification have contributed to the commercial success of the movie. It thus once more proves that the topic of capital punishment, as I stated earlier, plays a significantly attractive part in the media industry, especially in Hollywood film. By showing an execution, *Dead Man Walking* also mimetically repeats and exploits the "fascinosum et tremendum" or the sacred morbidity that formerly in Europe attracted crowds to public executions.

But this ambivalence does not, in my view, substantially undermine the theological merits of *Dead Man Walking* in its imagine of the multilevelled action of witnessing. Appealing by means of its story and style, images and faces, symbols and metaphors to the imagination of the audience, we, the public, are invited to become witnesses of a complex process of violence and victimization, of distance and proximity, of confession and testimony. This is

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[16] Cf. Ricoeur 1990, ch. X.

[17] According to actress Susan Sarandon, as recorded in an interview with Pernille Tranberg, published by Amnesty International In *AI Journal* 4/1996: 14-16.

something of paramount interest that the film makes available for systematic reflection for a theology and pragmatics of action and solidarity.

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TWILIGHT OF THE VAMPIRES:
HISTORY AND THE MYTH
OF THE UNDEAD

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"Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he
does not become a monster."

(Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, IV, 146)

One of the most satisfying parts of an extended engagement with the
mimetic theory is the bird's-eye view of history that it affords
one—that magnificently coherent panorama which stretches from
proto-hominids through the Passion to post-culture and the Apocalypse. The
sheer scope of Girard's historical vision is also, admittedly, one of the more
controversial aspects of his theory. As early as *Violence and the Sacred*
(French, 1972; English trans., 1977), in a conscious revolt against the
anti-Hegelian and anti-systematic temper of the times, Girard implied a
historical *telos* for human culture that consists of the gradual replacement of
sacrificial by non-sacrificial paradigms and praxes. With the publication of
Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World (1978; 1987) and *The
Scapegoat* (1982; 1986), however, Girard appeared to step beyond the pale
of polite (read, secularist) academic discourse by explicitly identifying the
Christian Paraclete as the divine dynamo behind the historical process: "The
Spirit is working in history to reveal what Jesus has already revealed, the
mechanism of the scapegoat, the genesis of all mythology, the nonexistence of
all gods of violence" (*Scapegoat* 207). More recently, in an essay on Satan
(literally, "the accuser"), the contrasting role of the Paraclete (literally, "the
lawyer for the defense") as a defender of victims is again emphasized:

> It is possible to read the history, first of the Christianized
> West, then of the Westernized planet, our modern history, as
> . . . a process of vindication and rehabilitation of more and
> more persecuted victims. New hidden victims of society are
> continuously being brought to light; the consensus against
> them always dissolves after a while. First it was slaves, then
> the lower classes, then people of different ethnic and religious
> backgrounds. Today the victimization of ethnic groups, of
> women, of handicapped people, of the very young and the very
> old, is coming to light. (*Girard Reader* 208)

Most recently, Girard's view of history has become, if anything, more unified,
as (following Raymund Schwager) he has begun to emphasize the *continuity*
between the sacrificial and the non-sacrificial (without, of course, trying to
elide their differences). At a recent AAR/SBL conference in San Francisco
(22 November 1997), Girard discussed the Eucharist as a recapitulation of the
religious history of mankind, in which all previous forms of sacrifice are
present (from cannibalism and "other-sacrifice" to the other end of the
spectrum and "self-sacrifice"). Or phrased somewhat differently, the
redemptive effects of the Passion radiate backwards and forwards in time—
what Giuseppe Fornari implies when he refers to Christianity's "capacity to
redeem the *whole* history of man, summing up and surpassing all its sacrificial
forms" (187). It may well prove that "Sacrifice" (with a capital "S") is the
single most important and comprehensive word that we possess to describe our
history.

The central contention of this essay is that the phenomenon of the vampire
offers itself as a privileged site for exploring this work of the Paraclete in
history. The very processes of "bringing to light" and "exhuming victims,"
described by Girard above, are certainly metaphors appropriate to the twilit
world of the vampire, in which the undead are always being dug up or exposed
to the light. If I maintain that, this late in the twentieth century, we are living
in the "twilight of the vampires," the allusion to Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*
and Nietzsche's *Götzen-dämmerung* is not accidental. The ambiguity of the
German verb *dämmern* (which can mean "to grow dark" or "to grow light")
captures all the paradoxes that surround the mythologizing, demythologizing,
and remythologizing of the traditional figure of the vampire. I will explore
these paradoxes in five successive moments (in the most archaic and
traditional form taken by the vampire, then in a medieval persecution text, a
late-Victorian novel, a German Expressionist film, and finally a series of

contemporary popular novels) in order to demonstrate the various metamorphoses undergone by the vampire throughout a history which may be viewed as overseen by the Paraclete—and by a recalcitrantly violent humanity.

Vampires are found in every traditional culture,[1] where they always inspire fear, horror, revulsion, as well as fascination and even reverence. In world mythology and folklore, the traditional vampire is represented as a terrifying sacred figure, a monstrous Other who threatens to destroy, but also paradoxically possesses the ability to benefit, the community.[2] The dual nature of this representation suggests that we might read the traditional vampire in the light of Girard's "double transference," in which a persecuting community attributes its own disorder and order to a persecuted victim (*Things Hidden* 27). This would seem to imply that the traditional vampire is originally nothing more than an innocent victim who has been transfigured (or "mythologized") by collective persecution. One way of testing this hypothesis is to see if we can discover any tell-tale signs of the original victim(s). In *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin*, Montague Summers provides a useful composite portrait of the vampire as it is represented throughout the world:

> A Vampire is generally described as being exceedingly gaunt
> and lean with a hideous countenance. . . . When, however, he
> has satiated his lust for warm human blood his body becomes
> horribly puffed and bloated, as though he were some great
> leech gorged and replete to bursting. . . the nails are always
> curved and crooked, often well-nigh the length of a great bird's
> claw, the quicks dirty and foul with clots and gouts of black
> blood. His breath is unbearably fetid and rank with corruption,
> the stench of the charnel. (179)

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[1] Among the more obscure examples: the Hebrew "Motzetz Dam" ("bloodsucker"), the Chinese "Hsi-hsue-kuei" ("suck-blood demon") (quoted in Wolf 1972, 114), and the Irish "Dearg-dul" ("red blood sucker") (quoted in Summers 1996, 117). In the classical world, we find various Greek incarnations of the vampire (the mormo, empusa, and lamia), including the blood-drinking shades in the *Odyssey*, Book XI. Kali, the blood-drinking mother goddess, is still worshipped and feared in India.

[2] Frequently, the vampire is seen as a symbol of reciprocal violence, which can "benefit" the community in small amounts, but can also destroy the community through interminable feuds. Take for example the "Hameh": "A vampire bird of Arabia. It grew from the blood of a murder victim and would not rest until it had drunk the blood of the murderer. Its call was 'Give me drink!'" (Berenstain 38).

In this passage, physical deformity and moral monstrosity are so bound up with each other that it is difficult to disentangle them. Yet, if Girard is correct in his analysis of myths and persecution texts, the physical deformity always corresponds to actual traits possessed by the victim (which serve the dual function of originally attracting the violent mob's attention and appearing as a physical signifier of the victim's supposed moral flaws), while the moral monstrosity exists only in the minds of the victimizers and is projected onto the innocent victim (*Scapegoat* 34-5). In the above passage, there is a suggestion that the original human victims behind the vampire myth must have had long dirty nails and "hideous countenances" (like many witches), bad breath (like Philoctetes), and body types at both ends of the spectrum ("gaunt and lean" or "puffed and bloated") that would cause them to stand out from the crowd. As for moral monstrosity, there is the accusation of blood-drinking. In the case of the medieval Jewish "blood libel," our culture has learned to see through this mythical accusation, which is always nothing more than a projection onto the victim of the violent mob's own thirst for blood. We have yet to extend this interpretive advance to the blood-drinkers of traditional world mythology and folklore.

After the Crucifixion, and especially in cultures that have come under the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition, such entirely mythological representations of the vampire are no longer possible. While in pre-Christian, archaic, and primitive cultures, the vampire is always a monster, demon, or supernatural being, the face of the human victim behind the vampiric mask begins to emerge in the West, thanks to the leavening effects of the Gospel. This is especially apparent in medieval persecution texts like the following episode from William of Newburgh's *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* (a history of England from 1066-1198 that was written down in the late twelfth century). During the reign of Richard I (related by William *sub anno* 1196), a certain evil nobleman ("vir malae actionis") left his native province, fearing either the law or his enemies ("metu vel legum vel hostium"), and moved into Alnwick Castle. Not long after, he caught his wife in bed with his neighbor and— consumed with jealousy[3] and injured by a fall sustained while spying on the two—he died without making a final confession. Even though he had been given a Christian burial, his corpse began to wander the town and, by the power of Satan ("operatione Sathanae"), to terrify the residents. Soon the foul

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[3] The use of the undead to thematize jealousy, envy, and the other fruits of what Girard calls "mimetic desire" (see Girard 1996, 33-44) is also apparent in the love triangles found in Stoker's *Dracula* and Murnau's *Nosferatu* (to be discussed below).

corpse had infected the surrounding air, which caused a plague to break out that brought disease and death to every household ("Nam tetri corporis circumactu infectus aer, haustu pestilenti universas morbis et mortibus domos replevit"). While the leading citizens of the town were meeting in council to decide how to deal with this crisis, two brothers who had lost their father to the plague went to the cemetery, dug up the nobleman's swollen corpse, and beat it with a shovel. So much blood gushed out of the corpse that it immediately became apparent to them that this was the vampire ("sanguisuga") who had destroyed the lives of so many. The corpse was then taken outside the walls of the city, and burned in the presence of all of the surviving members of the community. When the body had been completely consumed and purified by the fire, the plague ceased, and life returned to normal in the community (William of Newburgh 479-82).

William of Newburgh's account is especially enlightening, since the whole issue of blood-sucking is peripheral to the main story. We would not even know that we were dealing with a vampire, were it not for William's constant use of the epithet "sanguisuga," which he clearly borrows from the community of persecutors. The accusation of blood-sucking allows the two brothers to link an apparently harmless dead individual with the much larger crisis that has affected the entire community ("universas domos"). In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard writes that

> any community that has fallen prey to violence or has been stricken by some overwhelming catastrophe hurls itself blindly into the search for a scapegoat. Its members instinctively seek an immediate and violent cure for the onslaught of unbearable violence and strive desperately to convince themselves that all their ills are the fault of a lone individual who can be easily disposed of. (79-80)[4]

The two vengeful brothers (and, following them, the whole community) choose as their victim an outsider, a man whom everyone "knows" to be evil, an individual who has clearly been the target of some kind of persecution before ("metu vel legum vel hostium"). Following the sacrificial logic of "post hoc, ergo propter hoc," this isolated individual (who has been deserted by

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[4] For an interesting discussion of the relationship between the plague and persecution, see also "The Plague in Literature and Myth" (Girard 1978, 136-54) and "The Scapegoat as Historical Referent" (Girard 1996, 97-106).

community, wife, and even life) is blamed for the plague, dug up, and immolated (thus demonstrating that the only culturally regenerative death is a lynching, not a natural death). What is immediately apparent to any twentieth-century reader of this text would have been less apparent to William of Newburgh: here the "culprit" is clearly no monster, but rather a regular human being, who is completely innocent—if not of "malae actionis," then certainly of blood-drinking and spreading the plague. The Paraclete has brought the hidden victim to light, with the result that even in early modern Europe, it is impossible to generate any new vampire myths. William of Newburgh's text is, like the Crucifixion, a failed myth or persecution text.

The gradual process of demythologization that we have observed in the movement from primitive vampire myths to medieval persecution texts continues in our own world. More and more innocent victims of collective persecution are being rehabilitated and brought to light It is, however, an exceedingly slow process.[5] Ernest Jones reminds us that even as late as 1855, a cholera epidemic in Danzig resulted in mass hysteria and the widespread belief that the plague had been spread by vampires (Jones 123). We know now that "plagues" are the result of bacteria or viruses—though with the advent of AIDS, the links between blood, plague, and the search for scapegoats (e.g. gay men, promiscuous heterosexuals, the CIA, etc.) have reemerged in a startling new constellation. Even as the vampire is being demystified in our world, even as we are at last becoming conscious of our new interpretive ability to "see through" myths and persecution texts, the vampire is being remythologized and reborn in a thousand new incarnations. Such is the durability of the old sacrificial order that under attack, like the HIV virus, it goes underground and reemerges in new strains. Before our culture congratulates itself on having moved beyond the need to believe in demonic powers, the need to project our own violence onto symbols of absolute evil, we would be well-advised to notice that any secularization of Satan that has occurred over the last hundred years has been accompanied by an extraordinary revitalization of the vampire myth.

In other words, if our age is no longer able to believe in the "opera Sathanae," it does believe in Dracula, who is a kind of secularized or media-popularized Satan. Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, first published in 1897, has never

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[5] This may be a blessing in disguise, since a too rapid decay of the sacrificial order (without an equally rapid concomitant adoption of the Kingdom of God) would leave us with no barriers or channeling mechanisms to protect us from our own human violence (See Girard 1996, 189-93).

been out of print and has been the subject of more films than any other novel. The incarnations of Dracula in popular culture are too numerous to count: the twentieth century has given us not only Max Schreck's, Bela Lugosi's, Christopher Lee's, Klaus Kinski's, Frank Langella's, and Gary Oldman's Draculas, but also a Rockula, a Blacula (the first African-American Dracula), a counting "Count" of "Sesame Street," and a children's presweetened breakfast cereal, Count Chocula. Even in politics, the myth has come full circle: from the impaling Vlad Tepes of Wallachia to the lynched "communist Dracula" Nicolae Ceausescu. Is there any pattern to this proliferation of vampires? In a recent interview on the National Public Radio show "Fresh Air," the self-proclaimed "world's premier Dracula scholar" Leonard Wolf speaks of "a reversal of moral meaning for the vampire" that has taken place over the last 100 years: specifically, incarnations of Dracula have been getting "not only younger and younger, but also nicer and nicer," a phenomenon that Wolf finds "too bad." He cites Frank Langella's rather benevolent Dracula of the 1979 Universal Pictures production, as well as Chelsea Quinn Yarbro's 1977 novel *Hotel Transylvania*, in which the vampire is a "profoundly nice and decent" guy who takes only as much blood from his willing victims as is necessary to sustain his undead life. And yet at the same time that this "humanization" of the vampire continues, the enormous popularity of Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* attests to a perverse remythologization that the vampire has simultaneously undergone. To understand what lies behind this dual trend, it is first necessary to examine the two most influential vampires of the last hundred years: Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922).

Stoker's Dracula is a vampire at the crossroads, where the traditional monster of folklore meets modernity—where the primitive Sacred is incarnated in contemporary times and invades the modern metropolis. Dracula is another demonized figure,[6] a blood-sucking foreigner who threatens English womanhood and the social order as well. The reason for this mythological representation is clear. Although Stoker had never been to Transylvania, he draws heavily on Emily Gerard's first-hand research on Transylvanian folklore in *The Land Beyond the Forest* (1888). Gerard's chief claim to fame is having

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[6] Although Stoker provides us with multiple points of view (diaries of various characters, phonograph records, newspaper clippings, etc.), we are never given Dracula's point of view. He is a monster who is seen only from the outside. Of course, later retellings of the Dracula myth go out of their way to give us the vampire's point of view, or at least his motivation, as in Anne Rice (discussed below). See also Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, where the vampire is a tragic figure, alienated from God and separated from his beloved suicide-bride.

coined the word "nosferatu," a word which appears in no Romanian or Hungarian dictionary, but which Gerard, Stoker, and all later vampire stories and films have taken to mean "undead." The editors of the Norton *Dracula* suggest that Gerard "mistook a usage of the Romanian adjective *nesuferit* ("plaguesome")" (Stoker 334n), which was apparently used in Transylvanian folklore in connection with vampires. Although Dracula is referred to as a "nosferatu" numerous times by the vampire-hunter Van Helsing, the thematics of the plague, which are present in all of the traditional folklore, go underground in Stoker's novel, and, as a result, in almost all later film adaptations. Stoker does give us rats that have taken over Dracula's new piece of English real estate, Carfax Abbey, but these are clean English rats, not foreign invaders bearing the plague, and are easily vanquished by a pack of merry aristocratic dogs (Stoker 222). The only other "plague" in Stoker is clearly Dracula himself, a force of contagion who, though he casts no reflection in a mirror, is able to create doubles of himself in other ways—to replicate himself indefinitely by turning the victims of his bite into vampires themselves.

We have seen how the vampire always invades the community from without,[7] bringing with it violence, social disorder, undifferentiation, or (which is the same thing) the plague. Although the vampire is clearly a symbol of internal social meltdown, he is always connected to the invading Other. In Stoker's *Dracula*, Professor Van Helsing (who himself is a foreigner) tells us in his comically bad English: "He [the vampire] have follow the wake of the berserker Icelander, the devil-begotten Hun, the Slav, the Saxon, the Magyar" (211). Critics who see Stoker's novel as simply an expression of Victorian anxieties about "reverse colonization"[8] have allowed their postcolonial resentment, their animosity towards the British Empire, to get in the way of their seeing the theme of the "invading Other" in its larger anthropological context—now finally made possible, as we have seen, by the mimetic theory. The traditional vampire is not some evil Queen Victoria, but rather a monstrous source of disorder, who must be expelled, lynched, or decapitated and staked in the heart. As with Oedipus (or the nobleman of Alnwick Castle), to get rid of the plague, you must get rid of the stranger.

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[7] Thus the Transylvanian Dracula and (as we shall see) Nosferatu invade London and Bremen, respectively. See also the 12 December 1942 cover of *Collier's*, which portrays a caricatural Japanese vampire flying over Pearl Harbor (reproduced in Bhalla, illustration 22).

[8] See for example Stephen D. Arata's "The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization, " reprinted in Stoker 462-69.

It is only in Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu, Eine Symphonie des Grauens* that this traditional plague, and its "cure," are restored.[9] Murnau's film is set in Bremen in 1838,[10] a year in which an actual historical outbreak of the plague occurred, and opens with the following titles:

> From the diary of Johann Cavallius, able historian of his native city of Bremen: NOSFERATU! That name alone can chill the blood! NOSFERATU! Was it he who brought the plague to Bremen in 1838?

> I have long sought the causes of that terrible epidemic, and found at its origin and its climax the innocent figures of Jonathan Harker and his young wife, Mina.

These titles, followed by an opening high-angle shot of Bremen—a sort of God's-eye view—suggest that we are encouraged to trust the all-seeing, omniscient point of view of our filmic narrator, Johann Cavallius. We are reassured that this particular narrator is reliable, a well-educated "able historian" who reasons scientifically and asks rhetorical questions whose answers are clear ("Of course Nosferatu caused the plague!"). Cavallius, like the deist's God or Stephen Dedalus's artist, hides himself behind his handiwork and allows his historical narrative to unfold with only minimal interference. Jonathan Harker is sent by his employer, the real estate agent Renfield ("a strange man" who is the "centre of much gossip") from Bremen to Nosferatu's castle in the Carpathian mountains in order to sell him some Bremen property. After signing the deed to an old empty house that is directly across the street from the recently married Harker's house in Bremen, Nosferatu spies a picture

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[9] For my research, I have used an 84 minute "restored version" of Murnau's *Nosferatu* (Kino Video 1991). Thanks to Mark Kratter, for first introducing me to this film; and to Michael Min, at Industrial Light and Magic, for tracking down a print of Werner Herzog's 1979 remake *Nosferatu, Phantom der Nacht.*

[10] Rather than getting permission from Bram Stoker's widow to adapt *Dracula* (which was, in 1921, still under international copyright), Murnau (in an unusual show of bad judgement, or perhaps German-English rivalry) changed many of the character and place names, as well as many details of plot. Thus Stoker's Jonathan Harker became Jonathon Hutter, Mina became Nina, Count Dracula became Graf Orlock (or Nosferatu the vampire), Renfield became Knock, and 1897 London became 1838 Bremen. To make matters worse, many English reprints of Murnau's film restore all or only some of the original English names. In this paper, I will use Stoker's names throughout, in an effort to avoid any confusion, and to make switching between Stoker and Murnau easier.

of Jonathan's wife Mina ("Is this your wife? What a lovely throat!"), sucks his mimetic rival's blood, then locks Jonathan in the castle, and travels (along with a number of coffins filled with earth and rats) by boat to Bremen. Along the way, all of the ship's crew die (whether from Nosferatu's bite, or from the plague, is never made clear), so that the ship is driven to Bremen only "by the fatal breath of the vampire." With Nosferatu's arrival in Bremen, the plague strikes and begins to decimate the town's population. Meanwhile, Jonathan manages to escape from the castle and make his way on horseback back to Bremen. Here, in a classic example of "mala curiositas," his wife Mina reads in the forbidden "Book of Vampires" that

> "Only a woman can break his frightful spell—a woman pure
> in heart—who will offer her blood to Nosferatu and will keep
> the vampire by her side until after the cock has crowed."

In an act of Christ-like self-sacrifice, Mina resolves to offer herself to Nosferatu in order to stop the plague.[11] Nosferatu spends the night sucking her blood, and is so distracted that he fails to notice the approach of dawn. The cock crows, the sunlight begins to filter into the room, and Nosferatu dissolves into a puff of smoke and a heap of ashes. Jonathan rushes in, Mina dies in his arms, but at least the plague has been stopped, as the narratorial voice of Johann Cavallius returns to tell us:

> "And at that moment, as if by a miracle, the sick no longer
> died, and the stifling shadow of the vampire vanished with the
> morning sun."

The death of an innocent woman is all that is needed to stop the plague in its tracks. It is at this point that we might want to ask how seriously Murnau (or his screenwriter Henrik Galeen) would like us to take the authority of his "able historian" and frame narrator.[12] Is this an example of Murnau's mythological thinking, or is Murnau offering a critique of nineteenth-century historiography? The answer might be found in a comparison with Stoker's

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[11] A clear permutation of the Caiaphas principle (John 11:49-50), or the Virgilian formula "unum pro multis dabitur caput"; see especially Cesáreo Bandera, *The Sacred Game*.

[12] Murnau, like Stoker, fails to give us the vampire's point of view, either through titles or camera angle. Compare Arthur Conan Doyle's short story "The Sussex Vampire" in which Sherlock Holmes, as a sort of scientific detective-paraclete, takes the side of the victim and shows that she has been unfairly and falsely accused of being a vampire (Conan Doyle 72-88).

original conclusion. In *Dracula* (in an interesting anticipation of Freud's *Totem and Taboo*), a "noble brotherly band" made up of representatives from all of England's social classes (as well as the Dutch Van Helsing and the Texas cowboy Quincey Morris) chases Dracula back to Transylvania, where he is simultaneously decapitated and staked in the heart by the band's very internationalist weapons—a bowie knife and a kukri knife. For this final scene of collective violence at dusk, Murnau chooses to substitute Mina's self-sacrifice and Nosferatu's magical dissolution at dawn—a mythological scene whose photophobia has been imitated by most subsequent film-makers. This might lead us to conclude that Murnau has expelled the original expulsion,[13] which becomes particularly sinister if, with Kracauer, we choose to read Nosferatu as a prefiguration of Hitler and all of the "emotional ambivalence" (Kracauer 79) that he inspired.

Nevertheless, Murnau has made one other change to Stoker's plot, a change that has been previously overlooked by the critics. In Stoker, Renfield is simply a madman, a "zoophagous" patient who, like the "Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly," graduates from eating flies to eating spiders, birds, to possibly kittens and human beings, all in imitation of his mimetic model Dracula. Stoker's Renfield is an anti-John-the-Baptist, a lunatic *vox clamantis* who announces the anti-Christ vampire's arrival in London, only to be brutally murdered in his cell by Dracula.

In stark contrast with this individual murder, Murnau's Renfield[14] is collectively murdered (or nearly so). Renfield, who is already at the beginning of the film (as we have been told by Cavallius) a "strange man" and the "centre of much gossip" is blamed for the spread of the plague and stoned as he sits on the top of a tall roof (in this strange mythological representation, Renfield casts the first stone—a gesture that is then imitated by everyone in the crowd below). The stones bounce off Renfield's head as, evidently unhurt, he cackles with glee. He then climbs down from the roof like a monkey and is chased by the crowd outside of the city walls. He manages to elude the crowd, who (in a classic scene of *diasparagmos*) fall instead on a sacrificial substitute—a scarecrow that Renfield has set up. When we next see Renfield, he has evidently been captured by the crowd and imprisoned once more in the lunatic asylum. Only a few hours later, Renfield slumps over dead in his cell, at the

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[13] See Girard 1978, 169.

[14] Renamed "Knock" by Galeen and Murnau, perhaps in onomatopoeic imitation of the sound made by the stones glancing off his head. Knock is a conflation of Stoker's real estate agent and Renfield the madman.

exact moment that Nosferatu perishes in Mina's room. The implication is, of course, that both Nosferatu and his double Renfield, have been "murdered" (albeit in different ways) by the town. Murnau tries to suppress the collective violence that is present in Stoker, but (like a displaced Freudian symptom), the lynching pops up somewhere else. At this late date in history, the mechanics of generative scapegoating can no longer be completely driven underground—"Murder will out."

In his well-known sociological study *Image and Influence*, Andrew Tudor writes that it is possible

> to distinguish a single basic horror narrative to which all conform, something we might label the "seek-it-out-and-destroy-it" pattern. . . The whole genre revolves around the creation or discovery of an *it, its* recognition, seeking, and destruction. (209)

Although Tudor is writing specifically about film, his description applies equally well to the search for scapegoats that we have found behind so many vampire texts. Tudor's insight in the realm of "genre theory" is inseparable from the work of the Paraclete that we have been discussing. It is only when the light of the Gospel has diffused the fog of older mythological representations that it becomes possible to theorize and analyze the scapegoat mechanism which, as we have seen, lies at the root of the vampire myth. Yet at the same time that this demythologization is underway (not only in the books of scholars, but also in the realm of the popular imagination—as Wolf's comment about the vampire's gradual humanization reminds us), there is always the possibility of remythologization. Anne Rice tells us that *Interview with a Vampire* (1976), the first book in her series *The Vampire Chronicles*, began when she asked herself what it would be like to see the world from the vampire's point of view (Wolf 1997, 189). Unfortunately, in the process of "siding with the victim," of giving speech to the monster that Stoker had left silent, Rice remythologizes the victim, reinvests him with violence, and then glamorizes that violence. Rice's vampires are, as Wolf puts it, a "race of brilliant and beautiful—always beautiful—killers" (195). In *The Tale of the Body Thief*, Rice tells us that her vampire Lestat has

> full and beautiful blond hair, sharp blue eyes, razzle-dazzle clothes, an irresistible smile, and a well-proportioned body six

feet in height that can, in spite of its two hundred years, pass
for that of a twenty-year-old mortal. (Rice 1992, 3)

With Rice's attractive, almost Byronic vampires, we have come a long way
from the bloated and pestilent figures of folklore, or even Murnau's
melancholic Nosferatu. In fact, much of Rice's tremendous popularity seems
to derive from her ability to reanimate other hackneyed nineteenth-century
formulae, such as the fusion of sexuality and death. Take, for example, the
following description of blood-drinking by one of the vampires in *The Queen
of the Damned*:

> The blood is all things sensual that a creature could desire; it's
> the intimacy of that moment—drinking, killing—the great
> heart-to-heart dance that takes place as the victim weakens and
> I feel myself expanding, swallowing the death which, for a
> split second, blazes as large as life. (Rice 1988, 3)

In the era of AIDS, Rice's vampires obviously provide vicarious titillation for
a generation that has been taught to fear all exchange of blood and bodily
fluids. Unfortunately, her uncritical portrayal of eroticized violence also turns
the original victim into a victimizer. The vampire-outcast is remade in the
image of sexual liberator and counter-cultural hero, and then imitated in
neo-Byronic fashion—as is evident to anyone who has seen the black cloaks,
fake fangs and blood on American university campuses, or witnessed the
recent proliferation of neo-Gothic nightclubs and music videos,[15] which
manage to combine sado-masochism and blood-drinking with a renewed
obsession with the undead.

The question remains as to how to reconcile this latest popular version of
the vampire with the process of the Paraclete's rehabilitation victims that
Girard finds at work in post-Crucifixion history. It appears that the hidden
victim has been brought to light by the Paraclete only to be plunged back into
the darkness of glorified violence by a stubborn humanity; the twilight of the
vampires may be just one more dawn in the long history of Sacrifice. In this
respect, Nosferatu's magical dissolution at dawn becomes a metaphor for the
ambiguity that has surrounded the vampire in the twentieth-century: our
secular thinkers believe that the sunlight of modern scientific rationality has

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[15] See especially Marilyn Manson's "The Beautiful People" and "Sweet Dreams (Are Made
of This)" (Interscope Records 1997).

finally destroyed the phantom of superstition, but at the same time there is the growing concern that what we are witnessing is just one more version of the myth of regeneration through violence. Nietzsche's comment about the growing inability to distinguish monster-hunter from monster becomes prophetic of our modern dilemma. How are we simultaneously to see absolute evil for what it is, while still maintaining pity for the innocent victim (Nosferatu? Mina?)? And how are we to side with the innocent victim without turning him into a victimizer or an idol (as Rice does), or succumbing to the endless cycle of retributive justice?[16]

The solution to this gap between modern popular representations of the vampire and the work of the Paraclete lies in a text which, we are now finally in a position to see, has underwritten all of our analysis of vampires. The complete history of vampires is contained in and presided over by readings, and misreadings, of a key biblical text. In *John* 6: 53-56, Jesus tells his disciples:

> If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise that person up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in that person. (*New Jerusalem Bible*)

We have already alluded to the Eucharist as a recapitulation of the religious history of mankind, in which all previous forms of sacrifice (including cannibalism and "vampiric" survivals like blood-drinking) are emptied of their violence and presented in a transfigured form. We have also seen how, in the twentieth century, this process has been reversed as our culture has created its

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[16] In his 1979 remake *Nosferatu, Phantom der Nacht*, Werner Herzog does an excellent job of drawing our attention to this dilemma. After Nosferatu has already been killed by Mina's exposing him to the morning sun, Van Helsing transfixes his corpse with a hammer and stake. This bloody and superfluous gesture of vengeance leads to Van Helsing's arrest by the local authorities, who believe that *he* has murdered Nosferatu—whom they take to be nothing more than an innocent old man. As Van Helsing is led away to be executed, it becomes clear that Jonathan Harker has now become a vampire, thus taking Nosferatu's place. Mina's Christlike act of self-sacrifice fails to end the plague of violence, since the town's residents refuse give up vengeance and retributive justice (which occurs, oddly enough, as a direct result of Nosferatu's humanization and the townspeople's concern for victims).

own baleful imitations of Jesus and secularized versions of the Eucharist. Stoker's Dracula, Murnau's Nosferatu, and Rice's vampires turn out to be little more than caricatures of Christ—drawing blood *from* victims instead of shedding blood *for* victims, and leaving in their wake an army of the restless undead, instead of redeemed believers who await their final resurrection. Of course from a strictly thematic and structural point of view, Jesus has much in common with the vampires of traditional cultures (and even the Alnwick nobleman)—that is, Jesus is an innocent victim of mob violence. Nevertheless, from the Gospel's point of view, Jesus is the Innocent Victim *par excellence*, the sacrificed Lamb who reveals all those slain "since the foundation of the world." Like Murnau's Mina (whose image is juxtaposed with crosses throughout the film and who is shown embroidering "Ich liebe dich" on a sampler before being murdered by the vampire), Jesus offers himself up as a sacrifice, acting out of divine love for his Father and for humanity. And he invites our participation in that sacrifice, both by remembering him in that most unvampiric of ceremonies, the Eucharist, and by calling us to the divine life of the victim—never the victimizer. For, quite unlike the vampire's many modern incarnations, Jesus glorifies neither violence nor spiritual autonomy. Those who "drink" his blood and "eat" his flesh (or "abide in" Him, to use another Johannine metaphor) will have no need to create their own violent idols or to join the ranks of vampire hunters and worshippers.

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THE BODY AND THE BLOOD: SACRIFICIAL EXPULSION IN *AU REVOIR LES ENFANTS*

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In Scene 6 of the screenplay of *Au Revoir Les Enfants* the students are at morning Mass and Father Jean is reading the Gospel: "Truly, truly, I say unto you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will have no life in you." A student with the curiously ironic name of Boulanger ("baker") faints. François comments to his younger brother Julien, "There's nothing to eat. . . we can't have breakfast before communion." In the back of chapel sit three new students—Bonnet and two other Jewish boys disguised as Christians, protected from the Gestapo by the monks, but prohibited because of their religious identity from Eucharistic communion. Food as scarcity, as plenitude, and as life functions as the signifier of value and of every victim in Louis Malle's unforgettable portrayal of the loss of innocence in the occupied France of his childhood. Access to food was access to life in community—both religious and political—and the exchange of food, for what could not be consumed, plunges the small school society into its death. The cause of the dissolution of the school society is a failed sacrifice.

The farewell to childhood which the title of the film suggests is Julien's entry into the world of violence and victims, of mimetic rivalry, of sacrificial expulsion, and societal destruction. The angle of perception (Julien Quentin is Malle's quasi-autobiographical alter-ego) lures viewers out their own innocence and shocks theater audiences once again with the implications of all Final Solutions.

Three concentric levels identify the communities in dissolution represented in Malle's portrayal: France under the occupying military force, the school administrators and staff, and the pupils in their charge. At each level the

mimetic conflict is at a different state of societal crisis. At the highest level, the German occupation troops and their collaborators represent a moment of Violence Triumphant, a Monstrous divinity who can impose control over the group by terrorizing everyone. This persecutory violence, which has co-opted the judicial system, drives the community of French people into (at least outward) submission and passivity. When the Monster requires victims, the community must consent to offer them. The persecutor's need for victims in this film has its own demonic rationale: ". . . to rid France of strangers, of Jews," says Muller, the Gestapo officer in one of the final scenes. When persecutory violence is resisted, however, when someone refuses to offer the designated victim for expulsion, the unity of the submissive society dissolves. Those who will not conform may suffer the violence of those who find their private well being in an alliance with public persecution.

Father Jean, director of the school where Malle's scenario takes place, is one of the instruments of resistance. Only the other instructors and staff are aware of his activities in the French underground. The audience is admitted to his dangerous secret, even as it observes the contrasting immaturity of the students, especially Julien, who cannot bear to leave his mother and is still wetting his bed. When he asks his older brother, "What is a Jew?" he is given the alimentary explanation: "Someone who doesn't eat pork." In this cultural situation, the Jew is more frequently someone who doesn't eat. Quentin's half truth is only one side of a more ominous reality.

Father Jean, aware of that reality, first appears in the film to introduce Bonnet, the "new classmate" and to show the boy his dormitory bed. As the director leaves, the schoolboys display their own societal dynamics, resuming their customary internecine, frenzied battles and rivalries. They throw pillows; they mock the outsider, focusing their ridicule on his name. Later in a classroom scene, they will hiss, "Dubo, Dubon, Dubonnet. . . ."—an apt thematic detail with its allusion to wine and its liturgical translation into blood. In the morning Boulanger leads the attack against the stranger, slipping an icicle behind Bonnet's shirt collar. At recess games disintegrate into private quarrels. Their small brutal society is a microcosm of the larger world of which the schoolboys are apparently innocent but which they are grooming themselves to live in without remorse. They quote the political opinions of their fathers about Petain, Laval, Jews, and Communists. Bonnet's silence and Julien's confusion imply that the children are heirs to their parents' conflictual rivalries. As wealthy and privileged Gentiles, however, they do not comprehend the holocaust they are engulfed in and the extent to which they, even as adolescent boys, participate. The genius of Malle's film is his use of

the trauma of a child to mediate awareness of the social dynamics of violence and its cost in human victims .

The conflictual rivalry of the childhood society of the school is signified conspicuously by their refusal to share food—a refusal that thematizes the sacrificial crisis and leads eventually to successive expulsions and a momentary consolidation of persecutory force. In the refectory a plate of meat is passed from hand to hand. Father Jean speaks: "I would like to remind those who have personal provisions to share them with their fellow students." The children, however, unaware that some of their fellow students have no food coupons and no family to send them provisions, refuse to share, either consuming their private stores themselves or selling their gift food surreptitiously to the kitchen helper Joseph. Julien, oblivious of the cost of his small betrayals, sells his own preserves to Joseph, using the black market money to augment his stamp collection. Joseph, disfigured by a limp, is the go-between for the boys, mocked and abused by them partly because they are so dependent upon his duplicity for their own manipulation of scarcity. At this level of society, the victim is ready-made. He is marginal to the school community, he is poor, he is physically weak.[1]

Father Jean, at another level of the cultural order, calls his small community and their parents to restrain their desire for food and for riches. He calls them to awareness of their appropriate relationship to one another. The Body and the Blood he invites his congregation to eat is a call to spiritual unity. They are to become "one Body"—their unity signified not by ethnic identity but by the sharing of food, both real and sacramental. But the children have found their own victim to consume. The status of Joseph among the boys in the small school community is manifest in a brief scene when a group of students encircle him, mock him, push him down when he tries to get up, shout and bark at him. The scene is mob violence at its most typical in the world of children and most terrifying in the world of adults. The children's mistake, like the subsequent assumption of Father Jean, was to believe that Joseph was helpless. "I'm not a dog," he cries out finally, when rescued by one of the teachers.

The brutality of the schoolyard—represented by the camera closeup of squealing pigs fighting over food scraps—pales, however, before the brutality of the larger society beyond the walls of the small school. Joseph had said of the pigs, "In a month they'll be ready to eat." It is not pertinent here to

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[1] See Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, especially ch. 2, "Stereotypes of Persecution," for a description of the characteristics of victims.

delineate the psychopathological origins of the Final Solution, only to note that its terrifying search for victims represents a nation-state retransformed into a religion of human sacrifice, a regressive attempt to unite society, to achieve identity by expelling ethnic others.

The graduated intensity of Malle's film is based on the rhythm of an encircling hunt. In an opening scene French militiamen—Fascist collaborators—enter the school confines for a search. Julien, through whose eyes the audience experiences the events, sees a young instructor hustle three boys, including Bonnet, out of sight. But Julien seems not to know what is at stake. His idea of danger is the adventures of *The Three Musketeers* and the world of *The Arabian Nights*, fantasies that relocate him to an erotic Paradise far beyond the unrecognized dangers of his immediate world. With comparable disingenuousness, other schoolboys play at hunting down one another. Their bandanna game, organized by the school staff, becomes a hunt for Julien and Bonnet who run into the woods when they are pursued by the other team. Always aware of the possibility of being devoured, Bonnet asks Julien,"Are there wolves in these woods?" Then, after becoming hopelessly lost, the two boys are frightened by a wild boar in search of food, a savage reminder to Bonnet of another Monster in a hunt that was not a boys' bandanna game. When Julien and Bonnet are rescued by German soldiers on patrol who do not recognize the Jewish escapee, one of the soldiers remarks benevolently, "We Bavarians, we're Catholics." The hunt seems temporarily suspended in an ironic mesalliance, but its inevitable consequences are foreshadowed during the school movie scene.

The small school society—both children and staff—laugh uproariously at Charlie Chaplin's portrayal of "The Immigrant" and his struggle to disembark in America. Only Bonnet did not laugh, but gazed rather at the Statue of Liberty in the cinematic distance and immigrants straining against a rope. The behavior of the others in the audience recalls the spiritual reading earlier in the film: "Woe to you who laugh now, for the day shall come when you shall weep," at which the children themselves had laughed mercilessly, for the passage accompanied a pious vignette of Saint Simon Stylites, whose bizarre effort to escape society aroused their childish mockery.

The metaphor for the entire conflicted and trapped society of Malle's film is the restaurant scene. Bonnet is invited to join Julien, his rich, vapid mother, and his brother François for dinner in town. Seated at table, they witness the invasion of the restaurant by a noisy group of French militia who corner a Jewish patron and demand that he explain his presence: "Ce restaurant est interdit aux youtres!" ("This restaurant is out of bounds to yids!"). Other

diners—all limited to the only bill of fare, *lapin chasseur* (!)—protest. The Maître D' pleads, "Mr. Meyer has been coming here for twenty years. I cannot refuse service to him." This gesture of inclusion and its consequences defines the whole moral crisis of the French society depicted in Malle's film. A patron shouts for expulsion, and not merely from the restaurant: "Send the Jews to Moscow!" The confrontation is quelled strangely enough by German officers who object to the disturbance during their meal. Politics, for the moment, had to yield to the imperative of eating, but not until eating itself—and thus life in community—became a matter of authorization.

Outside the restaurant the boys see Joseph arguing with his girlfriend, who is walking hurriedly away. He had been using Julien's preserves to bribe her favors, but the exchange had apparently been futile. The Quentin brothers, finding his hopeless pursuit amusing, persist in mocking him. Since they routinely cheated him themselves, they could only cheer when others were equally successful. In a subsequent scene, Mme. Perrin, the school cook, conspicuous for drinking too much wine, pursues Joseph into the schoolyard, accusing him of stealing food, shouting at him, in fact, for misdeeds of which she also was guilty. Joseph had said of her once when she ordered him back to the kitchen, "She's worse than Germany." As the kitchen boy gradually becomes everyone's target, and as his desires are increasingly frustrated, Bonnet begins to relax. Ostensibly the lives of the two objects of persecution are unrelated, but they become entangled by the problem of who must be expelled when the theft of food from the school is discovered.

Caught by Father Jean with provisions stolen from the kitchen or sold to him by the schoolboys, Joseph immediately identifies those who had profited from their exchanges with him. Father Jean, observing that the not-very-innocent Mme. Perrin should have reported Joseph sooner, confronts the seven students whose jars of food were found in Joseph's locker.

Julien and his friends escape academic expulsion because of possible parental reaction. Joseph, who has no such persuasive financial power, is dismissed. "It is unjust, says Father Jean, but I must do it." In this critical moment pivotal to the narrative, the priest himself enters into a sacrificial mechanism, showing himself both unwilling to forgive and unaware of the power of resentment. His own sense of justice impels him to punish and to expel but his justice is not equitably distributed. He punishes only the one who cannot be defended. Joseph, weeping, leaves under the eyes of Father Jean who, according to the screenplay, "seems to be regretting the decision he has made." The boys, relieved that their only punishment was a postponement of vacation, hear Joseph sobbing, "And where will I go? I don't even have place

to sleep," a remark with curious affinities to the Christ of the Gospel: "...the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58).

The attempt at purifying expulsion in this case is inadequate to the sacrificial crisis that acquisitive mimesis has induced. Father Jean's detestation of the black market for the deprivation it caused to the poor leads him to expel from his community one of its petty agents. The sacrifice fails because of the retaliatory power of the victim whose resentment leads to murderous reprisal and to Julien's loss of innocence.

Joseph's revenge parallels the Biblical betrayal represented by the Judas figure of the Gospel narratives. He gives over Father Jean and the school society for a monetary substitute and like Judas, he understands the value of those he betrays.[2] Turning to the dominant sacrificial structure outside the confines of the school, he imitates those in every level of society who possessed what he did not and who had seen him as powerless. In one act he could exchange his non-being for monstrous divinity, allying himself with persecutory violence at the highest level and presiding over its local triumph. The reversal is swift and complete.

Father Jean's conscious understanding of persecution had been expressed in his sermon to parents and children assembled earlier for Sunday Mass. He had cited Scripture: "'Brethren, do not think you are all knowing. Do not return harm for harm. If your enemy is hungry, give him food. If he is thirsty, give him drink.'" He added, "We shall pray for those who are suffering, those who are hungry, those who are being persecuted. We shall pray for the victims, for their tormentors as well." His failure to recognize himself in the words he uttered is the *méconnaissance* of every persecutor and the flaw of every tragic hero. During the liturgy Bonnet had left his seat to join Julien at the Eucharist. Father Jean, startled at seeing him, hesitated, and refused to offer him the host. Giving communion to Julien, he moved on to the others at the communion rail. The sacramental restriction was an ominous reminder of the child's marginal relationship to the Catholic community and presaged the priest's eventual inability to save him from destruction. Later, Julien's sharing of preserves with Bonnet functions as an counterimage to the liturgical exclusion, and is especially significant because Julien had secretly discovered Bonnet's real name and identity.

The encircling hunt, which marks the tempo of the film, reaches its understated climax in a history class, where the world outside is reduced to a wall map. "The Americans," we are told by the instructor, "are trapped in

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[2] See James Williams's comment on Judas in *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred* (225).

Monte Cassino." As one boy starts to leave—complaining about the school soup—he is driven back by Gestapo officers who enter the room, demanding to know which of the children is Jean Kippelstein. In a moment of concern when Julien thinks the officer is preoccupied with ripping little Russian flags from the wall map, he glances at Bonnet, the famous *regard* that so many critics have seized upon as Malle's trademark and into which they read too much in this case.[3] The glance is intercepted, Bonnet is identified and quietly begins to gather his things. He shakes hands with his fellow students in a gesture of farewell and forgiveness. The school is ordered to be closed. In a final effort to declare his friendship he gives the departing Bonnet his copy of *The Arabian Nights*, that icon of unreality that had nourished his pubescent fantasies : "Do you want *The Arabian Nights?*" he inquires innocently. Bonnet silently accepts the book, only too aware of what Julien cannot yet imagine.

As the hunt for the other Jewish boys continues throughout the school, Julien sees the nurse, flinching before military authority, betray one of them hiding in the infirmary. In the face of persecution, the school society disintegrated, other religious believers lapsing into betrayal. But Julien's complete loss of innocence does not occur until he meets Joseph in the courtyard and realizes who has invoked the catastrophe. Joseph offers him a cigarette, a thematic link to the cigarettes for which Julien's brother had traded preserves and to the cigarette a German guard was casually lighting in the background when Bonnet was packing to leave. Julien accepts the cigarette, the preferred unit of exchange in the black market world of the school, but he backs away from Joseph in horror. Stanley Hoffman, commenting upon this

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[3] An interview with Louis Malle includes the director's comments on the *"regards triangulaires"* which punctuate the film. When interrogated about the significance of Julien's glance, Malle replied: "Evidently, there I pushed it to the extreme. It is the lived scene I remember most precisely, but I added this detail completely unconsciously when I recast the scenario. Upon re-reading my first draft, I said to myself, 'But that's bizarre—why? It didn't happen that way. . . .' And then I realized that there had to be an explanation, a way of saying after the fact, that I felt myself to be responsible. And also it seemed to me very natural in this film where the two children turn around each other and never stop observing each other and looking at each other. This little boy is the only one in the class who knows who Bonnet is, his real name, and he cannot prevent himself from glancing at him. The impulse is too strong, it is something he does almost unconsciously, and besides, when I wrote it, when I shot the film, I didn't think I would be taken at my word. I have since read in many critics that it is a way of saying that I feel myself responsible for the Holocaust, and I'm going to tell you that unnerves me a bit, because, frankly, that wasn't my idea at all. If there is a collective responsibility, yes, I share in it, but after all I was this little French boy like the others, a little boy eleven years old whose family was active in the Resistance. . . ." (Decock 673).

scene writes that for Julien, ". . . this is the real discovery of evil, for it comes not from outsiders—the Germans—but, so to speak, from within his own world, from another boy whom he knew" (19).[4]

Joseph's desire for mimetic retaliation—as well as his real need to find a way to live outside the environs of the school—had disallowed the possibility of remaining silent. Resentment, the revenge of the weak, would take its course. Father Jean had found himself in conflict with his own fidelities: compassion for the poor and a judicial system, over which he presided, which required a small dose of violence to restrain acquisitive desire. But caught in the societal system himself, he could not apply that remedy to the sons of those whose financial support he needed. By excluding Joseph from forgiveness—against his own better instincts—he triggered an escalation of revenge. Joseph, not as helpless as those who had expelled him from their society had assumed, turns to another judicial system, which could defend him and satisfy his mimetic desire for power and prestige, for self-sufficiency, for a violence so definitive that it could end all further violence to himself. His new coat, his cigarettes, his cocky demeanor evidence the exchange. *"Fais pas le curé"* ("Don't act so pious"), says Joseph in his attack on Julien. "It's all your fault. If I hadn't done business with you guys, I wouldn't have been fired." Then, invoking that distinctly Gallic expression of male intimacy, here symptomatic of Julien's sudden access to the adult world, he shouts to the fleeing Julien, "That's war for you, *mon vieux.*"

When the schoolboys are gathered in the courtyard for interrogation, Boulanger, chief glutton and hoarder, whispers to Julien,"Are they going to take us away? We haven't done anything." The proclamation of innocence, here understandable in the milieu of childhood, always characterizes the persecutory mob. Boulanger's naive question is forgivable because he is no more cruel than adolescent schoolboys everywhere and has more reason to be terrified at this point than most schoolboys in history. His exculpation, however, is emblematic of the adult world he mirrors. "We haven't done anything" is the beginning of myth. Tragedy—and *Au Revoir les Enfants* surely meets the criteria of that genre—deconstructs myth by designating

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[4] Hoffman observes: "The rich have ways of dealing with the poor—by making bargains of mutual corruption and forging bonds of dependency in which they ultimately have the upper hand. The boys give Joseph food and money in return for cigarettes; they need him but they treat him as a servant. . . . Clearly [Malle] still feels guilty, if not for the part he played, at least for the failure of so many of the French, and of the members of his class, in particular, to save the victims of the Nazis" (19).

persecutors more clearly. No one in this film, except the ultimate victim, escapes the contagion of violence. This is not to argue that the French (and certainly not French schoolchildren) were responsible for the Holocaust. It is to note merely the analogy between the behavior of the French children in this film and the adults who were their models, to observe that those engaged in sacrificial expulsion always see themselves as innocent.[5] The only innocents in this text are those who know who they are, what world they live in, and why they will not survive.

As the children submit to identification by their food ration books, Father Jean and the three Jewish children under arrest pass by. The priest's brave and affectionate *"Au revoir, les enfants"* invites first a single, then a unitive response: *"Au revoir, mon Père."* They do not know how else to respond, nor why they now speak in one voice. Bonnet, at the gate, manages a last searching glance for Julien who offers a fragile wave goodbye.

The final adult voiceover describing the death of the Jewish boys and their priest protector in concentration camps brings the theater audience abruptly to the present. The decades collapse between the German occupation of France and Louis Malle's transformation of memory into a study of misrecognition and human sacrifice. Awareness of the catastrophic consequences of complicity with evil, even in its pervasive banality, is Julien's farewell to childhood. Malle's retrospective is cathartic in a sense profoundly different from that of the sacrificial rite it describes. It clarifies by its somber light the world of childhood from which we have all been expelled, and purges briefly the illusions of innocence so many have attempted to salvage from that same world.

The most significant aspect of the film is its revelation of the blindness of those who do not define themselves as persecutors. The schoolboys, smoking their cigarettes at the edge of the playground, are cocky in their manipulation of the system, unaware that they are mere imitators of the adult world they imagined themselves despising. The German soldiers saw themselves as benevolent rescuers and fellow Catholics. The cook saw her indignation as righteous although she also was stealing food. Julien imitates the older boys, unaware of the consequences of his petty black marketing. His mother is vapidly unaware of the effects of her political indifference. Father Jean had preached to the congregation: " Brethren, do not think you are all knowing." He, the hero of the film, the most "knowing" of the whole society, the most

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[5] See especially Girard's discussion of this point in *Violence and the Sacred*, especially Chapter 3, "Oedipus and the Surrogate Victim."

aware of the religious implications of the local situation, was not "all knowing." His one miscalculation led to the triumph of violence and the collapse of everything for which he had suffered and prayed.

Few dramas disclose the blindness of the persecutory mob as clearly as does Malle's film. What the characters need to know is inaccessible apart from a revelatory experience, for even after the tragic climax, they are unaware of their own participation in the mechanism of sacrifice. Their blindness exemplifies in a particularly systematic way the hiddenness emphasized so consistently in René Girard's thesis:

> Satan is the name for the mimetic process seen as a whole; that is why he is the source not merely of rivalry and disorder but of all the forms of lying order inside which humanity lives. . . Murder is therefore not an act whose consequences could be eliminated without being brought to light and genuinely rejected by men. It is an inexhaustible fund; a transcendent source of falsehood that infiltrates every domain and structures everything in its own image, with such success that truth cannot get in. (*Things Hidden* 162)

The film pushes the concept of *méconnaissance* beyond what we can comfortably endure. If even those who resist persecutory violence can become themselves unknowing collaborators—and in this film that unwitting collaboration is quite believable—what are we to say of the witnesses to this story?

"That's war for you, *mon vieux*," says the departing Joseph. The temptation is to accept that explanation: the cliché that explains everything and allows us to dismiss Joseph as just another weasel. Malle's film is a particularly brilliant exposé of Father Jean's sermon: "Do not think you are all knowing." If the mimetic theory, especially in a tragic enactment, can lead us to any disturbing conclusion, it is that our awareness of its mechanism may fail us precisely at the moment when we need it most. Only when we ourselves suffer persecution will we achieve that position of epistemological privilege that is totally explanatory. When Father Jean became himself the victim, he understood finally what all victims know: the power of evil, the catastrophic consequences of resentment, and the complicity of the world in the destruction of the innocent. The hearers of his story, however, can enter only partially into the final vision of this central character. Like the children in the courtyard, we are left behind, trying to understand, yet hoping somehow that we will never

be made to understand. When mimetic theory is dramatized this competently, we may find ourselves reluctant to embrace its conclusions.

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SACRIFICE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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The Inscription on the Memorial to Irish Freedom in Parnell Square, Dublin, reads: "O generations of freedom, remember us, the generations of the vision." The irony, of course, is that the generations of freedom to whom the inscription is addressed have yet to be born. Or rather: they/we are partly a generation of freedom, while remaining also and of necessity a generation of vision. Freedom—always partial and imperfect where it exists at all—remains bound up with vision. And violence (so the memorial tells us) is never far from vision.

Is it possible to conceive of a public sphere free from violence? This is the question I address here with the help of Hannah Arendt. I begin by describing Arendt's distinction between the public and private realms and summarizing Seyla Benhabib's interpretation of these categories. Arendt, of course, valued the public sphere of contestation that she associated with the Greek world; for her, the private realm of the household should remain completely separate from public life—the private was a place of mere necessity, devoted solely to maintaining the physical body. According to Benhabib, we can follow Arendt in thinking of the public sphere as a place of contestation and hence of potential pain, or we can allow the concerns of the private into the public realm, and thus work to create a public sphere based on association and potential solidarity. Working out of the communicative theories of Jurgen Habermas, Benhabib tries to pull Arendt toward Habermas by emphasizing what she calls Arendt's "reluctant modernism": those elements of her thought that move away from a sharp distinction between public and private and tend toward association and solidarity. And yet—this is the conviction that motivates this essay—history tells us that we cannot simply exchange one for the other. The poignancy of my epigraph springs, I think, precisely from our

realization that vision never modulates easily into freedom. The monument's inscription, the very fact of its existence, links vision indissolubly with bloodshed and sacrifice, while imagining freedom as a peaceful realm beyond violence, a place of harmony and solidarity for which the "generations of the vision" were willing to sacrifice themselves. Yet we are not that generation of freedom. We have not shed the burden of vision and history, for history is never simply behind us. What the eighty bloody years since the Easter uprising have taught us, if anything, is that the coming of freedom is always delayed and that the hopes for a peaceful transition from vision to freedom, agon to association, revolution to democracy, are forever marred by the reality of a world where there is more than one vision and where continued sacrifices in the name of vision seem to bring us no closer to peace, or to freedom. Who is the monument for, then? We must conclude that it is for us who remain somewhere between vision and freedom, forced by our own monuments to acknowledge that history that continues to infect our present.

If agon and association, vision and freedom, inevitably bleed into each other, then we cannot talk realistically about one simply replacing the other. In this regard Arendt's work is crucial because it teaches us that movement from an agonistic Greek public to an associative modern public is accomplished only at the cost of displacing the distributive violence of the Greek world onto a figure of suffering. The necessity of such suffering is the element that Benhabib, with her emphasis on the ideal communicative community, misses. Therefore, highlighting suffering helps us to understand Arendt: the suffering figures scattered through her work are the only way to make sense of her crucial notions of storytelling and forgiveness. More generally, highlighting suffering helps us understand what is at stake in any utopian theory of the public sphere: envisioning the transition from an agonistic public sphere, defined by its relationship to violence, to a nonviolent associative public sphere of peace and communicative ethics is impossible without acknowledging those who pay the price for such a passage. Freedom, if it does come, comes at a terrific cost—and there is no guarantee that it will still be here tomorrow.

1. Agonism and Associationism

Arendt draws the distinction between public and private most clearly in *The Human Condition*. She describes the Greek *polis* as a place of action and speech "from which everything merely necessary or useful is strictly excluded" (25). The *polis* is a public place of freedom and equality where the fundamental concern of the citizens is to talk with one another. It is the space

of politics, the showplace of courage, and the preserver of all that is noble in human life. The private realm, or household, is the inverse of this: it is a place of unfreedom and inequality, dedicated to the realm of necessity and the demands of the body, a place where one is "primarily concerned with one's own life and survival" (36). For Arendt, the greatness of the Greek world consisted in the ability of its citizens to negotiate the dangerous passage from household to *polis* and back again, to shuttle continually between the realms of freedom and necessity, and to rest from the labors and dangers of public citizenship within the comforting environs of the household. But this ability no longer characterizes modernity. "In the modern world," she writes, "the two realms constantly flow into each other like waves in the never-resting stream of the life process itself" (33). The modern world causes public and private to bleed into each other, giving rise to a new form of human life which Arendt terms "the social." A realm that is neither public nor private, the social excludes the possibility of action because it replaces the values of individuality with certain kinds of behavior that tend to normalize its members (40). Rather than the sharp contrast between the free *polis*, where men strove to distinguish themselves, and the unfree household, dominated by the common needs of the body, the rise of the social presents us with a homogenized world where action has been reduced to behavior, and statistical uniformity lends itself to the manipulations of a totalitarian state.

It is no surprise that feminist thinkers have given Arendt bad marks for her public/private distinction. Her apparent preference for the Greek *polis*, where only male citizens have access to public power, while women remain with slaves and non-Greeks in the realm of bodily necessity, runs directly counter to the main thrust of feminist theorizing over the past twenty years. At the height of second-wave feminism, Adrienne Rich called *The Human Condition* a "lofty and crippled book" that "embodies the tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideology" (Rich 211-12), while Jean Bethke Elshtain implied a similar masculinist bias when she complained that Arendt was "enraptured with heroes who died young" (Elshtain 58). More recently, however, as feminist theory has turned away from an overt rejection of the public/private distinction and toward theorizing a model of politics and political action, feminists have turned to Arendt's categories with renewed interest. As I noted earlier, this revisionary project has been taken up most thoroughly by Seyla Benhabib.

Like much of her other work, Benhabib's interpretation of Arendt is indebted to the thought of Habermas and the notion of a communicative ethic. In her earlier work Benhabib adopts a rather easygoing vision of community,

such as the new model of social organization that she envisions at the conclusion of her *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*:

> The community of needs and solidarity is created in the interstices of society by those new social movements, which on the one hand fight to extend the universalist promise of objective spirit—justice and entitlements—and on the other seek to combine the logic of justice with that of friendship. (352)

This sounds very nice, but one suspects that the painful process of *achieving* such a community has not been adequately acknowledged. Here and elsewhere Benhabib spends most of her time *justifying* the communicative community, and very little time actually describing the means by which we might get there. Peter Uwe Hohendahl makes what I take to be a similar point when he notes that Benhabib relegates "history and historical questions to the background." For Benhabib, Hohendahl suggests, a theory of the public sphere cannot be grounded in history but must instead be anchored in abstract principles as the only viable way to negotiate questions of the common good (101). In a more recent critique of Habermas, Benhabib suggests that communicative theory focus not on consensus itself but on the way that consensus is established. She wants to shift the burden from consensus "to the idea of an ongoing moral conversation" (Benhabib 1992, 346). Yet ironically, her emphasis on procedure once again has the effect of cleaning up and dehistoricizing the public space of debate. She suggests that "we view discourses as a procedural model of conversations in which we exercise reversibility of perspectives either by actually listening to all involved or by representing to ourselves imaginatively the many perspectives of those involved" (363), but she gives little attention to the method by which we might develop this enlarged mentality, or to the ways that historical experience might enable or constrain such development. Coming to a consensus may involve very painful compromises; even achieving the sort of community in which the communicative ethic can operate may require the sacrifice of individual desires and dreams—perhaps of individual life itself. Yet these facts disappear in the picture of mutually enjoyable conversation that Benhabib paints. In her ideal community, there are no victims, and there is no history.

The desire for a victim-free public sphere is certainly understandable, but it hinders Benhabib's ability to understand Arendt. She identifies two competing models of public space in Arendt's thought, the "agonistic" and the

"associational." In the former, she writes, "the public realm represents that space of appearance in which moral and political qualities are revealed, displayed, shared with others. This is a competitive space, in which one competes for recognition, acceptance, and acclaim" (1990, 193). Arendt, of course, identifies this public space with the Greek *polis*; Benhabib doesn't hesitate to criticize it for being antimodern and for privileging "the predominantly male experience of death through war and domination" (1993, 103). Arendt's associational model, says Benhabib, is the more modern of the two, since it recognizes that a strict separation between a comforting private sphere devoted to necessity and an agonistic public sphere devoted to action is no longer an accurate description of the modern world, where the two categories are constantly merging and recombining. Arendt's associational model of public space, writes Benhabib, "emerges whenever and wherever men act together in concert" (1990, 193-94). She goes on to argue that this model is more conducive to a feminist politics, since "in entering the public realm women seem to be bringing with them a principle of reality into this sphere, namely the necessities which originate with having a body, and which from Arendt's point of view have strictly no place" in the agonistic public sphere (1993, 98). Thus the procedural model of public space allows us to integrate facets of human experience that the agonistic model leaves out. Benhabib's choice of association over agon is therefore a strategic one, since it implies that personal issues important to women (reproductive freedom, domestic violence) be accorded a public hearing. "The defense of the more modernist conception of politics," she concludes, "found in [Arendt's] associative model, and the defense of the entrance of women into the public sphere is closely related" (1993, 103-104).

By turning Arendt's theories to feminist use, Benhabib reverses the negative characterization of the rise of the social in Arendt's theory. While for Arendt the social realm was harmful because it flattened the distinction between public and private life, in Benhabib's hands feminist concerns ride into the political sphere on the coattails of a hybrid society. Benhabib's redescription of the Arendtian social as an unavoidable necessity of modern life has the virtue of pulling Arendt's thought toward a modern conception of political action and making it more amenable to contemporary concerns. But while this rejuvenation of the social may be a step forward, Benhabib's rejection of the agonal model has an important consequence. What Arendt's "Greek" conception of public and private highlights is the difficulty of passing from one to the other, the potential for violence that lurks in such a passage. By declaring that we no longer need concern ourselves with such a passage in

the modern world, Benhabib effectively removes violence from the modern public sphere. Bonnie Honig makes a similar point when she notes that Benhabib accomplishes her redescription of the public realm only by "excising agonism from her thought."[1] Honig's point, I take it, is that Benhabib misrepresents both the reality of present politics and the historical continuum within which such a politics has its being by drawing a sharp distinction between the agonistic and associational models of public action.[2] Living and acting together, *in the modern as much as in the Greek world*, can lead to disagreement, pain, and even death. Indeed, a normative political model that seeks to bring disagreement under the umbrella of communicative rationality fails to account for the central role of conflict within a necessarily pluralist democracy. As Chantal Mouffe has recently argued, facing democratic politics means facing the antagonism that lurks within social relations (9).[3] Doing away with such antagonism in the name of consensus, as attractive as it may seem, denies the reality of the historical achievements and disasters on which we stand. A workable model of free public association, assuming such a thing can exist, does not appear within a historical vacuum but rather rests on the bodies of those who sacrificed themselves (and were sacrificed) for what was then only a vision. Any contemporary political model must include the stories of such sacrifices and such visions, or risk simply abstracting itself from the historical conditions that gave it birth.

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[1] Honig (1995b, 156). Honig's deconstructive interpretation of Arendt emphasizes the disruptive and performative side of public action; she celebrates Arendt's agonism as a model of feminist politics and refuses to gender it male, declaring instead that it destroys gender binaries altogether.

[2] In her most recent work on Arendt, Benhabib appears to take the historical dimensions of her argument more seriously. She notes, for instance, that "while the ideal of the sovereign public collectively deliberating about the common good is a regulative ideal as well as a constitutive fiction of democracy, historical, social, and institutional developments show the need to qualify this ideal" (1996, 209). While this seems like the right direction, Benhabib's "historical, social, and institutional developments" remain firmly within the realm of general principles and norms rather than particularities. That is, she strives to develop a normative model of public debate that remains, in theory, open to historical and social valences—but she never shows how such openness would alter the norm itself.

[3] Mouffe argues for the central importance of conflict and antagonism within a democratic politics, a position with which I basically agree. Like Bonnie Honig, however, Mouffe reads such agonism through deconstructive categories, while, as the remainder of this essay will make clear, I think that Arendt provides a more fruitful and complex approach to agonistic politics.

2. Storytelling

While Benhabib may be correct in identifying an agonistic and associational model in Arendt's thought, it is by no means clear that Arendt herself thought of the distinction as very important. It seems clear, in other words, that Arendtian politics are characterized by both agonism and associationism. Certainly the public sphere is potentially violent simply because it permits dissent. Self-exposure, writes Arendt, is the primary characteristic of the Greek *polis*; to appear in public is to risk exposure to the censure of everyone else: "Whoever entered the political realm had first to be ready to risk his life, and too great a love for life obstructed freedom" (1958, 36). Consequently, for Arendt, if we are to envision a viable public space that has as its goal the betterment of human life through debate and disagreement, we must be willing to risk exposure by acting and speaking before our peers. This realm of public appearance establishes a shared reality because "everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody" (1958, 50). Nonetheless, this shared reality is also a space of acting in concert: the space of appearance, while it offers no promise of agreement, does suggest that human plurality need not preclude the possibility of communicative action—a commonality constructed by learning how each of us sees the world differently and becoming, in a phrase Arendt picks up from Kant, a "citizen of the world." In keeping with this communicative ethic, Arendt notes that the public space of appearance has no core values, no transcendental truths or pre-made contracts. Its values are constructed in *ad hoc* fashion by the participants: "the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised" (1958, 57). In her late *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* Arendt expands on these hints from *The Human Condition* by presenting Socrates as a model of both the agonistic and communicative thinker:

> What [Socrates] actually did was to make public, in discourse,
> the thinking process—that dialogue that soundlessly goes on
> within me, between me and myself; he performed in the
> marketplace that way the flute-player performed at a banquet.
> It is sheer performance, sheer activity . . . . He became the
> figure of the philosopher because he took on all comers in the
> marketplace—was entirely unprotected, open to all

> questioners, to all demands to give an account of and to live up
> to what he said. (1982, 37-8)

This description accords nicely with Honig's version of the agon: Socrates is unprotected, performing in the marketplace, disrupting the false ideas of the Athenians.[4]   Yet Arendt shortly goes on to blend Socrates' agonistic performance with a notion of communicability that sounds much more like Benhabib's ideal. "Unless," she writes, "you can somehow communicate and expose to the test of others whatever you may have found out when you were alone," then critical thinking itself will disappear (1982, 40).   "Critical thinking" of the sort that Socrates practiced, Arendt concludes, "implies communicability" (1982, 40).

It is not at all clear, therefore, that Arendt thought of agonism and performance as fundamentally different from communication and association. Socrates makes his thought public "in discourse": a discourse that is at once an unprotected agonistic performance and an effort at communication. What matters for Arendt, after all, is not so much the superiority of one model of public discourse to another but the very fact of publicity itself. Once we recognize this, we can understand that Socrates's discourse, a blend of agon and association, is the metaphorical equivalent of the literal passage between household and *polis* that Arendt identifies in the Greek world. Effective critical thinkers bring their conclusions into the public space, where they are tested, debated, modified, rejected, in an atmosphere that alternates (depending upon its historical and cultural context) from association to agon and back again. It is the arrival of ideas in the public square that concerns Arendt—and it is this arrival, this discursive passage, that she calls "storytelling." Storytelling is the key to recovering a vibrant public/private relation in the wake of the modern rise of the social, because telling stories about ourselves transfers private experiences into the public sphere, and if we are being authentic, we disclose ourselves in the process. In constructing such narratives "men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other" (1958, 176).   It is

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[4] Jonathan Ruth-VanAntwerpen has suggested to me that Arendt's description of Socrates as "entirely unprotected" is only part of the story. To be sure, Socrates was killed for his beliefs, but his practice of asking probing questions and destroying his interlocutors' false pretenses to wisdom are hardly the practices of an entirely unprotected man. At a discursive level, then, it is the Athenians who are "entirely unprotected" from his stinging critique. By ignoring this element of Socratic practice, Arendt's interpretation perhaps overemphasizes the degree to which Socrates was a sacrificial victim of the public sphere that he himself helped to create.

important to understand that this space of appearance is not a comfortable one—there is every possibility, as I intimated earlier, that one may be mocked, shouted down, or beaten as the result of self-disclosure. At the same time, storytelling is a model of communication for at least two reasons: those who mock and beat also operate within the public sphere and therefore appear to their peers as the mockers and beaters they are. Hence they are in turn possible objects of violent treatment, and possible subjects of stories. In addition, the very notion of a story implies the existence of an audience, and this audience has the power to evaluate the storytellers and their stories critically. By telling a story we necessarily enter a public realm full of potential relations and characterized by multiple avenues of communication. This realm need not look like the Greek *polis*; the power of storytelling, and its distinctively modern character, creates a viable public space of appearance in even the most private settings. In this sense, the hope for modern society rests on our ability to tell good stories: stories that create a discursive space in which we can disclose ourselves, stories that counteract the homogenizing effects of the social realm by reinscribing a vibrant space of public/private interaction that is home to both agon and association.

It is not, however, always possible for stories to achieve this utopian relation; at times they seem fated to remain a private moral enterprise. In cases when the moral public sphere is perverted or disintegrates entirely, one must withdraw into private to preserve moral integrity: "The truth of the matter," Arendt writes of the Holocaust, "is that only those who withdrew from public life altogether . . . could avoid becoming implicated in crimes" (1964, 186). The great difficulty in living under dictatorial regimes, she points out, is the absurd reversal of ordinary morality: criminality becomes the law, while a moral act becomes a crime. Usual moral values like obedience become morally reprehensible. Because criminal acts appear so normal under totalitarianism, we must derive an ethical sense that transcends the norms of the regime from somewhere else. On the evidence of human history, Arendt rules out the possibility that we possess innately such a sense. On the evidence of the Holocaust, she rules out the possibility that we can rely on human institutions to endow us with such a sense. Those few individuals, then, who did resist the Nazi moral order must have done so on other grounds. Arendt suggests this possibility:

> They asked themselves to what extent they would be able to
> live in peace with themselves after having committed certain
> deeds; and they decided that it would be better to do nothing,

> not because the world would be changed for the better, but
> because only on this condition could they go on living with
> themselves. . . . they refused to murder, not so much because
> they held fast to the command "Thou shalt not kill," as because
> they were unwilling to live together with a
> murderer—themselves. (1964, 205)

Making a judgment of this sort, she continues, requires only the habit of
"living together explicitly with oneself . . . of being engaged in that silent
dialogue between me and myself" (1964, 205). This is storytelling on the
private level: we refuse to capitulate to totalitarian regimes because we will be
unable to live with the story we must tell to ourselves about ourselves if we do
capitulate. In the absence of a viable space of public appearance, private
moral storytelling requires that we think of ourselves as constituting that space
of appearance, and that we sit in judgment upon whatever of ourselves is
revealed there.

It remains unclear how these two forms of storytelling—the private and
the public—are related. Is the public kind generally enough to preserve an
ethical society, and the private sort only necessary in periods of extremity? Or
should the two work together at all times? The connection itself is not
adequately explored by Arendt. The two levels must be related, however,
since the act of stepping into the light of the public world is surely preceded
by private rehearsals. And if we understand storytelling as the modern
equivalent of the Greek passage between household and *polis*, then what
Arendt values in the act of storytelling is precisely the ability to negotiate the
pathways between differing realms. In her account of Anton Schmidt, a
German soldier who supplied the Jewish Underground with forged papers and
military trucks, Arendt implicitly suggests that even under conditions of
totalitarianism, public and private storytelling are related. When Schmidt's
story was told at the Eichmann trial, Arendt writes that

> A hush settled over the courtroom. . . . And in those two
> minutes, which were like a sudden burst of light in the midst of
> impenetrable and unfathomable darkness, a single thought
> stood out clearly, irrefutably, beyond question—how utterly
> different everything would be today in this courtroom, in
> Israel, in Germany, in all of Europe, and perhaps in all
> countries of the world, if only more such stories could have
> been told. (1963, 231)

Arendt is obviously resorting to the language of appearance here; the "sudden burst of light" recalls her description of the light of the public realm. Telling Anton Schmidt's story in the courtroom is an act of public storytelling. But since her wish that "more such stories could have been told" means in effect "if only there had been more people like Anton Schmidt," Arendt is evidently thinking also of the private kind of storytelling: if only more people had told themselves the proper story about themselves and decided, like Anton Schmidt, not to live with a murderer.

3. Sacrifice

The example of Anton Schmidt suggests a dialectical relationship between public and private storytelling. Anton Schmidt told himself the right story, and this enabled him to act, to appear in public as a compassionate actor. Such appearance, especially under conditions of totalitarianism, is very dangerous: he was executed by the Nazis after five months. Yet Schmidt's story and actions also become the subject of *another* story, a story that reenacts Schmidt's entrance into public by appearing "like a burst of light" in the Jerusalem courtroom. The first time that Anton Schmidt steps into public, he does so as a person of vision acting within a present reality. The second time Anton Schmidt steps into public, he does so as a historical figure and an image of the way that history invades the present: the story of his life becomes a historical marker for the way things might have been if more such stories could be told. As storytelling becomes historical, we glimpse its relationship to suffering. "Because," writes Arendt,

> the actor always moves among and in relation to other acting
> beings, he is never merely a "doer" but always and at the same
> time a sufferer. To do and to suffer are like opposite sides of
> the same coin, and the story that an act starts is composed of
> its consequent deeds and sufferings. (1958, 190)

Even in the best of circumstances, acting implies suffering because we are always involved in a complicated network of social relationships; the actions of others may cause us to suffer, and our actions start chain reactions that ripple through the social network and may harm others or even unpredictably rebound upon ourselves. Actions, in this sense, are irreversible, for we cannot undo what we have done. Consequently action implies suffering, and in the figure of the sufferer, we can begin to glimpse the relation between public and

private storytelling. Even in a public realm where agon is minimized, our public acts and public stories inevitably produce private instances of suffering: pain or personal discomfort are the inescapable outcomes of our participation in the realm of appearance. Once we have experienced such damage, once public appearance is transformed into the private experience of suffering, the very existence of the public space of disclosure is threatened. Suffering is therefore a threat to politics: if everybody withdraws from public to nurse their own wounds, public space itself will disappear. For Arendt this has dire results. The public is the realm of autonomy and of action, the place where humans are temporarily liberated from the necessities of nature. So withdrawing from the public sphere means sacrificing our freedom and subjecting ourselves to the predetermined demands of bodily necessity. When that happens, unjust regimes can easily colonize the political. Thus we should never willingly vacate the public space of appearance. And yet living in public for any length of time makes us vulnerable to the actions of others, and it is inevitable that we will eventually have to withdraw from the harsh light of the public. What we need, then, is a way to re-enter the political arena and begin its difficult work anew.

At this point Arendt introduces a new and vital term into her political theory: forgiveness. In order to reconstitute politics, says Arendt, we need to practice forgiveness. For the sake of the continued existence of the free public realm we must make it possible to re-enter the political arena, and therefore we must learn to forgive others for the wounds we suffer, and must in turn be forgiven for the suffering we have caused: "without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done . . . we would remain the victims of its consequences forever" (1958, 237). Beginning as a private moral action that moves outward into the public sphere, forgiveness reverses the trajectory from public into private enacted by suffering, interrupting the economy of resentment and drawing the individual out of her own private world and back into the public world of doing.[5] But such forgiveness lasts only until the next wound is given or received; bringing ourselves again into the harsh light of the public arena is a form of forgiving work that is never permanent but "needs to be reproduced again and again" as each new day dawns, as we commit once again to reforming and restarting the public realm by forgiving and being forgiven (1958, 139). Constant renewal motivated by faith in the moral necessity of the political realm is therefore crucial to its maintenance. Arendt

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[5] On this point see Orlie (347).

calls this renewing act of forgiveness *natality*: "the new beginning inherent in birth" that is new precisely "because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting" (1958, 9). As suffering and forgiving actors, we are each, in a sense, born anew every day.

My description of Arendtian forgiveness as defined by a movement from private to public should make it clear that I am drawing parallels between three separate parts of her thought: the passage from private to public and back again characteristic of the Greek *polis*; the way that storytelling figures this same passage by creating a space in which private concerns are spoken publicly; and finally the cycle of suffering and forgiveness that is an inevitable dynamic of human association. The important difference between the *polis* and these latter two is that while Arendt describes the *polis* as place completely free of private concerns, both storytelling and forgiveness describe a more dialectical relation between the two realms. Telling stories means that we allow our private concerns to burst into the sphere of public debate, and the act of forgiveness requires that we say, in effect, "I forgive you for this hurt *X* that you have visited upon me," and that we say this in public. In both forgiving and telling stories, then, the gulf between public and private is repeatedly crossed. Arendt imagines such crossing most unforgettably in figures like Anton Schmidt, who are wounded and suffering, who are the victims of a regime of unfreedom, but for whom storytelling and suffering, and the telling *of* suffering, momentarily construct a vision of a better order. So far I have used the metaphor of bleeding to describe the relations between public and private characteristic of storytelling and forgiveness; the presence of a suffering figure like Anton Schmidt suggests that the metaphor has a literal component as well. This becomes especially clear when Arendt turns in *The Human Condition* to an archetypal example of suffering.

4. Jesus

"The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs," writes Arendt, "was Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that he made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense" (1958, 238). Both Arendt's introduction of Jesus as the "discoverer" of forgiveness and her subsequent qualification are crucial to understanding her idea of the public sphere. In keeping with the former, she describes Jesus as a teacher of forgiveness, a political actor in the public realm. Those pages of *The Human Condition* where she speaks of Jesus are full of praise for his radical message: that we are required to forgive each other before God will forgive us, that

forgiveness signifies a new beginning, that vengeance is not our province. Like Anton Schmidt, Arendt's Jesus is both a storyteller and a figure whose story is a burst of light in the midst of darkness. What Arendt *doesn't* mention is that, like Anton Schmidt, Jesus was killed for his message and his example. Strangely, Arendt's "strictly secular" account of Jesus divorces his message from the events of his life, paradoxically ignoring her own dictum that suffering and forgiving go hand-in-hand. For although she holds that suffering is the precondition of the act of forgiveness, her interpretation of Jesus never mentions his suffering, and thus elides precisely those things that explain—theologically—his message of forgiveness: that he is the sacrificial lamb, that only his suffering and death can take away (forgive) the sins of the world.

Arendt's reasons for deflecting Jesus into the secular realm are easy to spot. In *The Human Condition* she argues that the emergence of Christianity in the ancient world was disastrous for politics because it introduced notions like the sacredness of each human life, granting dignity to the enslaved and the downtrodden. With Christianity, the private realm of necessity displaced the public world of politics and relegated it to a necessary nuisance: "Political activity, which up to then had derived its greatest inspiration from the aspiration toward worldly immortality, now sank to the low level of an activity subject to necessity. . . .It is precisely individual life which now came to occupy the position once held by the 'life' of the body politic" (1958, 314). The Christian reversal of the very values Arendt held so dear means that it is not surprising that she would strive to secularize her own account of Jesus. At the same time, this secularization is accomplished only by cleaning up Jesus, wiping away the marks of his suffering. A strictly secular interpretation of Jesus, after all, fails to offer any plausible explanation for his message of forgiveness.

What would a more satisfactory Arendtian account of Jesus look like? First, I think it would view the Christian muddling of public and private realms as a virtue, not a liability. This need not run counter to Arendt's theories. While Christianity may have subverted the radical bifurcation between private and public that Arendt celebrates in the Greek *polis*, her work on storytelling and forgiveness contains an implicit acknowledgment that, as Benhabib suggests, "the public space is essentially porous" (1990, 194). Or, to return to my metaphor, public and private necessarily bleed into one another, and such bleeding is figured in every instance of storytelling, in every dialectic of suffering and forgiveness. Far from being a capitulation to unfreedom, acknowledging this dialectic contains seeds of a radical politics. Jean Elshtain

suggests that Jesus remains important for political theory because of his "insistence that the realm of necessity, the nonpolitical or subpolitical realm, is not a despised forum for human endeavor . . . but, simply and profoundly, that place where the vast majority of human beings find their homes and must be allowed to live with dignity and purpose. . ." (1981, 63). Against Arendt, Elshtain argues for the political significance of Jesus: bringing the conditions of necessity into the light of the public is a political act whose consequences Arendt did not appreciate, since she saw necessity as antithetical to the autonomy required for public, political action. As I suggested above, however, Arendt's own theories of storytelling and forgiveness open the possibility of a politics grounded equally in necessity and freedom. Thus, Elshtain's use of Jesus as a model of politics is not only more consistent than Arendt's interpretation of Jesus but also more consistent with Arendt's own theories of storytelling and forgiveness, and in substantial agreement with the present state of feminist theory. I should emphasize, though, that this is not a utopian community debating issues of public and private import under the guidance of communicative rationality. The dialectic of suffering and forgiveness is truly a dialectic: forgiveness begins by acknowledging suffering, and the community that re-forms itself around this dialectic carries with it the memory of suffering.

The second element (and it flows inevitably from this dialectic) would highlight Jesus' suffering. At the center of Arendt's political theory is not, I think, an analytical distinction between public and private but rather a collection of figures, those whom she sometimes calls men in dark times: Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Jaspers, Anton Schmidt—and, perhaps, Jesus of Nazareth. These are not simply manly heros who died young, as Elshtain claims; they are, or can be, suffering and forgiving figures who model for us the passage between public and private worlds, who stand as monuments to the difficulties of such passages. Telling the stories of these figures serves as a kind of remembrance or memorialization. It makes explicit the suffering that lies at the foundations of community, and it highlights the degree to which a community must learn to ask forgiveness of its victims. Here again the story of Jesus serves as an appropriate model, since the whole point of the gospel narrative, as René Girard has argued, is to make suffering a public issue, forcing it from hiding, driving it out into the open, writing it down (1987, 181). To write a political theory that accomplished this same thing was, I believe, Arendt's ultimate goal. This theory aims to walk the difficult line between erasing suffering (under the guise of unfettered communication) and getting caught permanently in its web (as with scapegoating, for instance). It

accomplishes its delicate balance with equal measures of suffering and forgiving—and it tells the story of these acts so well that they become bursts of light in the darkness. Such a theory might well be worth practicing.

Santayana's adage that those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it captures the pragmatic sense of such a theory. Beyond this, however, Arendt's theory of storytelling may offer something like the possibility of redemption. Every public sphere, every political change, generates its own victims. Learning to ask their forgiveness is both the most humane and the most radical response we can have to this inevitability—humane, because forgiveness expands our community and exemplifies the "reversibility of perspectives" that Benhabib idealizes; radical, because seeking forgiveness disrupts our community by adding new members with different needs and desires. This addition means we must change our story, add another chapter to the history of suffering and forgiving that constitutes a community. For us, perhaps, it remains to remember suffering, to tell its story, and to wait for tomorrow, when—forgiven—we may live and act anew.

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MIMETIC VIOLENCE
AND NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING*:
TOWARD A CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS
OF RACISM

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In her recent essay, "Working through Racism: Confronting the Strangely Familiar," Patricia Elliot proposes that members of dominant groups who want to contest racism[1] not only challenge economic, political, and social processes within society that produce racism, but also address personal claims they make on institutional structures which help to maintain it (63). Sympathetic with an anti-racist strategy that concerns itself not only with racism at the institutional level but also with racism on a more intimate scale, Elliot nevertheless laments that individual complicity in racism is frequently attributed to a problematic attitude. As a consequence, anti-racist work among members of dominant groups often is arrayed along a narrow spectrum: in workshops or in-service seminars participants attempt to identify and acknowledge biased and discriminatory views. Elliot fears that consciousness-raising efforts of this kind are unlikely to effect social change if those who participate continue to favor the confessional stance. Urging her readers to develop a "critical consciousness," a concept she takes from bell hooks (hooks 118), Elliot asks that members of dominant groups who desire to promote social change not only combat institutional racism, but also divest themselves of *subjective investments* in racism (63). Only as persons commit

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[1] Racism "involves the subordination of people of color by white people" (Rothenberg 6). Marked by discrimination and prejudice, racism entails also the exercise of power (conscious and unconscious, intentional and unintentional) by which white people maintain positions of privilege over persons of color (Rothenberg 7).

themselves to a sophisticated and nuanced analysis of white complicity in structures of domination in order to grapple with racism at multiple levels—including *identity formation, maintenance, and transformation*—can members of dominant groups actually tackle and begin to dismantle it (Elliot 63).

Elliot's call to critical consciousness is laudable, but the goal she sets forth is not easily attained. As I struggle to achieve hook's critical consciousness of racism, like Elliot (64), I find difficult the task of exploring the construction of my own identity as a white academic.[2] For example, when I discuss issues in women's lives in the classroom or at professional conferences, I not infrequently am challenged by women of color who note that unexamined privilege (race and class) skews my perspective.[3] I also find myself speaking *for* others, assuming their voices, when I should speak only for myself. As a consequence, I regularly have cause to ponder whether, under the guise of contributing to anti-racist work, I am appropriating others' voices in ways that reinforce racism rather than challenge it. For instance, on what grounds do I, a white woman, in this essay propose to address the problem of racism by reflecting on a novella written by an African-American woman? Does white privilege foreground my choice, precluding me from reading a work of literature in ways that might challenge rather than further racism?

Grappling with these issues while reflecting on the theme of a critical consciousness of racism, I find instructive the Girardian notion of *mimesis.* The dynamics of mimesis account well for agents of racism who, simultaneously recognizing and denying difference, act in ways that inhibit social and subjective transformation. Were members of dominant groups to

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[2] Of course, a professional affiliation is only one facet of one's identity. I focus on that facet here because, through conversations with students about literature, I seek to contribute to anti-racist work.

[3] Recent publications record similar conversations among women of color and white women about white privilege. In *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Ruth Frankenberg offers an ethnographic analysis of the dynamics of privilege in white women's lives. In *The Color of Privilege: Three Blasphemies on Race and Feminism*, Aída Hurtado offers a reflexive theory of gender subordination which focuses on unwritten rules, inclusive of daily practices and psychological processes, that maintain power for whites as a group. Contributors to *Who Can Speak? Authority and Critical Identity* consider the ethics and political legitimacy of speaking *as* someone (e.g., a speaker identifies herself as white, middle-class, and heterosexual before offering her views) or *for* someone (e.g., a white Canadian author writes first person accounts of the lives of Native Canadian women but stops when a group of Native Canadian writers complain that her work disempowers indigenous authors [97]).

be more attentive to mimesis, they could enhance efforts to "work through" racism. According to Laplanche and Pontalis, who coin this phrase, actions directed toward previously intractable manifestations of racism will succeed if they "allow the subject to accept certain repressed elements and to free himself [or herself] from the grip of mechanisms of repetition" (Laplanche and Pontalis 488; cited in Elliot 65). Encouraging the subject to relinquish claims on being which it has maintained through the violent, other-denying reiteration of its position in the world, such actions promise new options in identity formation.

Building on Laplanche's and Pontalis's notion of "working through," in this essay, I describe ways in which Girard's notion of mimesis, invoked in the critical analysis of Nella Larsen's novella, *Passing*, can contribute to Elliot's call to dismantle racism by enhancing critical consciousness. *Passing* offers a particularly telling context for interrogating racism. In the first place, themes in *Passing* summon the reader to sustained reflection on the construction of raced identity, illuminating the role of mimesis in that process. But mimetic currents not only cross through *Passing*, shaping its narrative, they also move beyond it, mutually implicating the text and its reader. As a consequence, white readers of *Passing* can self-reflexively engage these currents, noting how they shape their reading of the text. Their critical reflection can lead to the exposure of subjective investments in racism. In the pages that follow, as I consider themes of race and mimesis in the narrative and reading of *Passing*, new insights for "working through" racism emerge. Arising from a conversation about a work of literature, they have broadly suggestive possibilities for anti-racist initiatives among members of dominant groups.

I. Racism as Acquisitive and Sacrificial Mimesis

According to René Girard, a mechanism of mimetic desire structures the human subject's acquisition of the world. Desire arises in the subject because it *lacks* being. Looking to an other to inform it of what it should desire in order to be, the subject finds its attention drawn not toward the object that the other recommends but toward the other who "must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being" (1977, 146). Desiring what the other desires because of a prior and more basic desire to be like the other, the human subject notes that the closer he or she comes to acquisition of the object of the model's desire and, through that acquisition, to the model, the greater is the rejection or refusal of the subject by the model (1977, 146-47). Veneration and rejection, mimesis and difference, structure the subject's experience of the world until, in a shocking denouement of the dynamics of rivalry that sees the

difference between the subject and its model obliterated by a single, common desire, the model becomes a monstrous double by whom the subject is as much repulsed as she was earlier attracted (1977, 160-61). This ambivalence results in a mimetic crisis that sacrifice has the role of resolving (1977, 146; 1987, 29).

This crisis is writ large in culture when memories common to each human are erased in the successful displacement of aggression and guilt onto a sacrificial victim. Explaining this process, Girard submits that groups of persons within a given society often display symptoms of economic, social, and political discord crisscrossed by multiplying trajectories of mimetic conflict (1987, 13). These conflicts coalesce and reinforce each other until, wholly beset by violence, persons turn in acts of unified violence upon a single victim. Girard identifies the channeling of violence, by which a mimetic free-for-all gives way to a focused attack on a single, arbitrarily chosen victim, as the scapegoat mechanism (1987, 24-25). When aggression and guilt are displaced onto a sacrificial victim, a single entity serves as a mimetic substitute for the many who condemn it (1987a, 125-26). But in death, the scapegoat also is an object of veneration (1977, 86; 161). Taking the community's violence with it, the scapegoat enables the community to return to stasis.

Girard's telling portrait of the role of violence in identity formation provides helpful entree into an analysis of human processes and structures of domination. Four aspects of his mimetic theory are especially suggestive for efforts aimed at bringing a critical consciousness to bear on racism. First, emphasizing that the human subject *lacks* being, Girard describes a *divided subject* who, in direct proportion to its discomfort with that status, strives to find in others that which will make it one. Observing that a fantasy of wholeness shapes human subjectivity, Girard opens a way for us to see that this fantasy fuels the drive to dominate others in acts of racism, for instance.

Second, because Girard tracks multiple aspects of the fantasy of wholeness—veneration and rejection, attraction and repulsion—he accounts for ways in which subjects secure their positions in the world in diverse ways. Applying Girard's notion to racism, we note that, although whites may rely on acts of direct acquisition of others (e.g., slavery) or sacrifice (e.g., lynching) to secure their identity, white subjects also take their bearings along an *extended trajectory of violence*.[4]

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[4] This trajectory is sacrificial because those who traverse it radically deny others' being. However, material acts of killing are not the sole gestures of absolute denial. Racism can be

Two contemporary treatments of "the other" elucidate this trajectory while emphasizing that the gesture of expulsion is central to the constitution of the subject. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva argues that the foreigner is "the hidden face of our identity" (1).[5] A dominant cultural group creates "foreigners" or "aliens" when, struggling to establish the boundaries of its identity, it projects or abjects what is dangerous, unwanted, or threatening about itself onto others (183-84). Just as Girard understands that there *is* no subject outside of the mimetic structure itself,[6] so also does Kristeva see in "the foreigner" only the face of the subject. Similarly, Judith Butler observes that persons who identify themselves as members of dominant groups (e.g., white and straight) do not to secure their claims on being by means of positive affirmations of identity. Instead, what they are comes into being as they simultaneously entertain and repudiate what they are not (e.g., black or gay) (3). As a consequence, identity is fundamentally dependent on its hidden face: an identification that institutes abjection and sustains it (3). Like Butler, Girard finds that the violence of the repudiating gesture—a mimesis of abject refusal—confers a plenitude of being on those whose identities are forged from what has been bounded off or exiled.

Third, Girard alerts us to the *repetitive* nature of mimetic patterns in identity formation. The subject position attained in the wake of mimetic conflict is fragile: only repeated repudiation—ritualized reproduction in signs of an original crisis and its resolution (1987, 103)—enables a subject to maintain itself. Butler's views concur with Girard's when she notes too that externalized figures of abjection are not abjected and buried in a forgotten past; rather, they must be buried again and again, so that "the compulsive repudiation by which the subject incessantly sustains his or her boundary holds that boundary in place" (114). Racism, on such a formulation, consists of repetitive and institutionalized gestures of disavowal that enable whites to

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brutally destructive even when its agents have no blood on their hands.

[5] Elliot cites Kristeva on similar grounds in her discussion of the construction of white identity in *In the Heat of the Night* (66).

[6] The term "interdividual," which Girard coins, well illustrates that psychic life under the conditions of mimesis "takes place as an interaction in a field of forces" (Webb 217). There are no self-possessed and bounded beings who relate to each other *interindividually*. After all, subjects do not possess mimetic desire; rather, mimetic desire, alone the subject, possesses them. Hence, for Girard, "violence, in every cultural order, is always the true *subject* of every ritual or institutional structure" (1987, 210). Asked by Jean-Michel Oughourlian if "there is never anything but mimetism and the 'interdividual'," Girard confirms that, apart from the Kingdom, "the only subject is the mimetic structure itself" (1987, 199).

regularly can observe what Girard describes as an "accelerated reciprocity of mimetic reactions" (1987, 34) along pathways of institutionalized oppression fed by rituals of racialized violence. Significantly, the human body is regularly invoked and featured prominently in the management of such intensely mimetic phenomena (1987, 34).

For instance, the history of colonialism is replete with examples of colonists' preoccupation with racializing the bodies of indigenous peoples.[8] Moreover, whenever mimetic tensions increase, persons who previously have been able to distinguish themselves from one another and enact inter*in*dividual relations do so no longer. New rituals of difference emerge. Desperately differentiating bodies from bodies but failing in their efforts to circumscribe boundaries effectively, those who enact these rituals express *interdividual* relations (1987, 35). Typically, in the absence of predicted patterns of order, the object of mimetic conflict emerges as "quintessentially *monstrous*" (1987, 35). In the case of race rituals, times of increased racial tension are marked by an ever more frantic racial inscription by persons who perceive that their very being is at risk of collapsing into the abject. The black man or woman now appears to whites as inhuman and wholly menacing.

An additional illuminating theme emerges at this juncture. When mimetic conflict becomes an end game, culminating in death, ritual is transfigured: conflictive mimesis becomes *reconciliatory mimesis*. At a decisive moment, victims polarize, signaling the arrest of hallucinatory phenomena (1987, 35). In dying, they facilitate the movement of violence away from the group. They become sources of peace or reconciling scapegoats. This mimetic pattern of sacrifice illuminates key moments in United States history: incidents of lynching summon images of the ritual death of a scapegoat.

That mimetic conflict fuels racism is attested to most compellingly by a concluding theme associated with mimetic theory: societies in the grip of acquisitive and sacrificial mimesis are able to *set aside all knowledge* of sacrifice. In a racist society, the law of white privilege conceals sacrifice. Under it, the only testimony remaining to racism's origins in the culture-creating work of violence literally is constrained to seep out of the law, emerging only indirectly in what Girard would describe as images of contamination and pollution (1987, 17). Jim Crow, mobilized to prevent polluting contact between whites and blacks, graphically attests in its minutia (e.g., separate drinking fountains for whites and black) to the deadening

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[8] Post-colonial studies regularly address this theme. One of the most important, for a student of mimetic theory, is Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*.

sustain subject boundaries only because of what they regularly refuse. Only because whiteness insists on itself through gestures of abject refusal of others can those who possess it secure themselves against an ever threatening dissolution of identity.

Finally, having employed mimetic theory to set forth key aspects of identity formation, Girard uses it also to show how mimetic violence is expressed in larger *cultural patterns of violence*. He sheds light on social processes through which the achievements of sacrifice are sustained in rituals that reinscribe and repeat the original repudiation out of which being is forged; moreover, he brings to our attention ways in which we deny and hide from ourselves the truth of our origins. Building on Girard's perspicacious assessment of culture, we have reason to see in his notions of acquisitive and sacrificial mimesis a pattern that accrues to racism. I cite here a series of illuminating themes.[7]

Writing of social rituals on which persons rely to maintain and consolidate their victories over mimetic threats, Girard notes that they often take *interdictory* form (1977, 235). So also does racism, in manifesting privilege, function as interdiction, bounding off and making invisible rites of violence that confer being on some at the expense of others. Objects of prohibition cited by Girard in the context of mimetic conflict—weapons, land, women (1977, 235)—accrue to structures of racism. For example, laws in the United States regularly have circumscribed access to property based on race. White people's long-standing obsession with miscegenation attests also to the interdictory preoccupations of racism while highlighting subjective investments humans make in it.

Examining racism as a form of mimetic violence illuminates its dynamics in another respect as well. Racism, institutionalized and ritualized in patterns of social interaction, facilitates what Hamerton-Kelley describes as a *double transference* when he writes that mimetic conflict passes through a community to a victim and back into the community in transformed and institutionalized manner: it "leaves as violence and returns as hominization, religion, and culture" (1994, 13). Tracking double transference in respect to race, we

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[7] When I suggest that racism is a social ritual and apply Girard's typology of ritual to practices of white privilege, I do not intend a comprehensive portrait of racism, whose complex contours the notion of "ritual" cannot wholly encapsulate. Nor do I offer an exhaustive treatment of ritual, whose diverse history within the context of religion exceeds the category of "racism." Instead, I employ the notion of ritual heuristically in order to illuminate some mimetic features of racism.

domestication of mimetic conflict in pollution ritual. Today, white flight exemplifies a privileged group's boundless capacity to deny agency in regard to mimetic discord. Memories of violence are buried under the manicured lawns of "lily white" suburban subdivisions.

Girard's mimetic theory helpfully illuminates persons' subjective investments in racism. Drawing on it, we better understand how racism functions in subject formation and maintenance. Because Girard's theory also links individuals and cultural institutions, tracking mimetic violence on multiple levels, it contributes to a nuanced analysis of racism. Therefore, on multiple counts, Girard's theory can assist members of dominant groups in promoting the critical consciousness which has been championed by Elliot as the necessary prerequisite for success in anti-racist work.

With their knowledge of the mimetic structure of racism enhanced, how can members of dominant groups who want to work against racism build productively on that knowledge? In the pages that follow, I employ two strategies to answer this question. In Section III, I draw on themes of race privilege in the text of Nella Larsen's *Passing* to further illuminate the mimetic dynamics of racism. But first, in Section II, I focus self-reflexively on reading *Passing* as a white woman. Each strategy, contributing to enhanced critical consciousness, suggests ways in which an encounter with literature, informed by mimetic theory, can offer a template for working through racism.

II. Mimesis, Violence, and Narrative Interpretation

What warrants a particular reading of a text? In recent years, to inquire of an author concerning her intentions for a text has become unfashionable. A text, we are told, belongs to the reader. But to which reader does it belong? Does the race, class, or gender of the reader matter? Do I, a white woman, do violence to *Passing*, the text of an African-American woman, when I read and interpret it?

In this essay, I contend that critical parameters for interpreting a text are set by mimesis. Furthermore, as boundaries for reading emerge in an interpretive play of desire, mimesis may become violent. How can that risk be addressed? Can reading promote critical consciousness rather than racism? Or will such efforts inevitably betray themselves as symptomatic of the appropriating and privileged gesture of racism?

Persons are often attracted to a work because they identify strongly with it. "This book," someone says, "speaks to me; I resonate with the experiences of its characters." The work of desire in the act of reading, which

identification exemplifies, promises life to the reader and the text. However, that desire readily becomes problematic if seeing oneself in the other becomes a grasping gesture. If the reader "takes" the life of the text, appropriating all difference to herself, the otherness of the text is lost: acquisitive mimesis becomes sacrificial mimesis.

Catherine Stimpson describes her own experience with this phenomenon. Speaking self-consciously as a white reader of African-American literature, she observes that "the white ego insists upon control. Not only do white readers demand that black literature satisfy their needs and notions, but they read it according to them." (Stimpson 1; cited in Awkward 66). The otherness of the text which sustains its life is sucked out of it and congeals around the white reader.

The reader's appropriating gesture is problematic also because the act of reading is normed by the abject. The reader finds meaning in a text not only when she claims its words and images for herself, but also when she simultaneously repudiates aspects of the text. She sustains her subject boundaries as a reader only because of what she *consistently and insistently refuses* in the text. In Stimpson's case, for example, only because white privilege constantly asserts itself through gestures of abject refusal of the other does it prove itself and secure what it possesses against dissolution, which the otherness of the text might invite or even mandate.

How might a white reader embrace a more generous hermeneutic practice, refusing acquisitive and sacrificial mimesis? How might reading become an anti-racist act? If no subject exists outside mimesis, as Girard has claimed, then current hermeneutic practices must be transformed from within the mimetic process itself. What one has already taken oneself for, which is already an act of repudiation, must be refused once again. On such a model, the multiple "isms" of exclusionary identity will not break open when white women reflect only on books written by other white women for fear that, if they discuss the work of African-American women, they will flaunt their own privilege. So also, on the mimetic model, being African-American does not guarantee that one will engage literature authored by other African-Americans in a nonappropriating manner. Because identity formation as well as narrative interpretation are always subject to mimesis, alternative readings must work *through* mimesis rather than apart from it.

Michael Awkward clarifies narrative interpretation, shedding light on the mimetic process, when he discusses three white critics who write about the African-American experience (71-87). Awkward considers the work of Donald Wesling, who has written on slave narratives of the early Republic;

Werner Sollors, who has authored a criticism of Afro-American studies; Harold Fromm, who has criticized Baker and Gates concerning the usefulness of contemporary literary theory for an analysis of African-American literature; and Barbara Johnson, who has written about Zora Neale Hurston. Awkward's analysis attests to the constraints visited on readers by mimesis as well as to its transforming potential.

According to Awkward, Wesling is at pains to describe his status as a white outsider to the slave narratives about which he writes. He imagines that insider status would accrue to one who could "live in the skin of another" (459; cited in Awkward 71). Wesling asserts repeatedly how "one who is not black" must "follow the lead of black scholars" when he makes claims on their semantic field (463; cited in Awkward 72). Awkward suggests that, precisely because Wesling construes his own stance toward the text in terms of outsider/insider, white skin/black skin, Wesling asserts white privilege, notwithstanding his confessional stance as an outsider (72). Challenging Wesling's binary construction of the act of reading, Awkward suggests that Wesling errs when he refuses to explore, "in energetic and useful ways, the points of similarity between 'black' and 'white' thought" (77). Presupposing difference, holding his own position in place only because of what he rejects—the position of black insider—Wesling retains white (author)ity.

Awkward questions the reading strategies of Sollors and Fromm as well. Sollors disavows any normative connection between the reader and the interpretive framework in which the text is read (251; cited in Awkward 78). He advocates that sectarian histories of literature be replaced with American literary history no longer fragmented by the claims of white women, African-Americans, and ethnic minorities. On his model, those who insist on citing gender or race in conversations about narrative interpretation exhibit a self-interest which proves irrelevant and even dangerous to the hermeneutic task (Awkward 80). By contrast, Awkward asserts, Fromm is Sollors's polar opposite. Fromm claims that Baker and Gates act like white and bourgeois intellectuals (52; cited in Awkward 81), regardless of their skin color, because they use contemporary critical theory in analyses of Afro-American texts. Employing theories that Fromm identifies as "white," Gates and Baker become "white" also. For Awkward, despite their broadly differing reading stances, Wesling, Sollors, and Fromm are prisoners of self-referential, identity politics. Each engages in processes of reflection that preserve the status quo; none challenges racism (85).

From a perspective informed by Girardian theory, the hermeneutic stances assumed by Wesling, Sollors, and Fromm attest to mimetic desire. Moreover,

Awkward's astute commentary illuminates elements of violence which shadow their desire. For Wesling, acute sensitivity to violence leads him to advocate silencing his own voice. Wary of asserting privilege in his encounter with the text, he is prepared to read not at all. In the mirror reversal of his own stance as a privileged white, he indicates that his own authority to speak should be approved or rejected by the black insiders whose voices he now champions. But turning the tables on mimesis does not overturn mimesis: if Wesling is authorized to read by a black reader, so also is the black reader's expertise certified only because Wesling has sanctioned the repudiation of his own authority. Having set the terms for his survival as an author, Wesling finds his own deficiencies fulfilled by black authors who confirm his being for him. Ironically, his self-repudiation speaks more powerfully of identity than do the black experts' words.

By contrast to Wesling, for whom the dynamics of mimesis plainly create discomfort, Sollors and Fromm profess satisfaction with their own interpretive stances. Nevertheless, their words attest forcefully to the work of mimetic desire. Mirrors of each other, Sollors and Fromm enact acquisitive and sacrificial mimesis while hiding all knowledge of their violence from themselves. Basing their subjectivity on a wholly unself-conscious repudiation of what is other, neither Sollors or Fromm perceives their dependence on others who abjectly found their own interpretative stances, sustaining their boundaries. In all three instances, mimetic violence informs readers' encounters with racial difference and is never challenged.

Seeking models of narrative interpretation that further anti-racist work, Awkward sees promise in Barbara Johnson's strategy. He notes that Johnson approaches the work of Zora Neale Hurston with a set of questions. She asks: am I trying to contribute to the attempt to adapt the textual strategies of literary theory to the analysis of Afro-American literature? Am I trying to rethink my own previous work? Am I talking to white critics, black critics, or myself?" (172; cited in Awkward 86). Awkward observes that Johnson does not ignore racial difference: on her reading, black and white do matter. However, she does not assume that a binarism of racial difference underlies the act of reading. Anticipating a different dynamic, she wants to engage rather than control it. Reflecting on this force, Johnson writes: "it was as though I were asking Hurston for answers to questions I did not even know I was unable to formulate" (172; cited in Awkward 86). Engaging the text but self-consciously refusing an acquisitive stance, Johnson attests to an alternative mode of narrative interpretation.

From a perspective influenced by Girardian theory, we can view Johnson making an effort to intercept acquisitive mimesis, break it open, and forestall its sacrificial moment. Rather than draw on insider or outsider status as an interpreter of Hurston, Johnson hopes to produce and reproduce her status as a reader in conversation with Hurston. She intends to intervene from within in order to critically perform (Butler 241) rather than repetitively construct her difference from the text. Johnson does not muse at a distance; she does not ponder how she can ever hope to write about racial oppression she has not experienced. Instead, she models a serious engagement with race.

Opting to destabilize deeply entrenched, repetitive patterns of mimesis, in her role as a writer, Johnson aims to perspicaciously traverse the pathways of desire, employing a voice that "assumes and articulates its own ever-differing self-difference" (Johnson 170). She is prepared to engage, as Kristeva would suggest, the dynamics of divided being, in order to "become reconciled with her own otherness-foreignness" (182). Journeying into the difference that is herself, Johnson does not escape mimesis. Instead, apparently accepting mimesis as her birthright, she appears ready to embrace "an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable" (Kristeva 182). Acknowledging the disunity and partiality of her stance, she does not struggle to overcome it. She does not relish the spoils of acquisitive mimesis. Instead she creatively negotiates mimesis.

Rather than advise us to think in terms of the resolutely bounded identities, as have Wesling, Sollors, and Fromm, Johnson invites us to read otherwise. Her interpretive strategy, to which Awkward has called our attention, suggests that exclusionary practices of race can be opened up when a reader recrosses boundaries of subjectivity that mimetic desire has previously secured in order to critically reiterate the mimetic patterns that the work of desire has previously set in place, norming race and gender. Johnson does not model critical consciousness by asking, "by what right do I, a white woman, write about a text authored by an African-American woman?" Instead, she demonstrates critical consciousness when she exchanges a repetitive reconstruction of mimesis for a more imaginative performance. Citing practices of dependency that have made her who she is because of what she has excluded, she anticipates disloyalty to a white norm and takes steps to creatively subvert it. Her reading practice invites social change because it

"works weakness" (Butler 237) in the acquisitive mimesis which has shaped race and gender. [9]

Serving as a primer for critical consciousness, the act of reading can offer members of dominant groups opportunities to practice "working through" racism. Engaged in narrative interpretation, they can take up familiar mimetic exercises. Re-membering rather than repeating themselves (Elliot 65), they can initiate transformation. The novella, *Passing*, written by a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance, Nella Larsen, can serve as the focal point for such an effort.

III. Mimesis, Violence, and *Passing*

Passing, set in the late 1920's, focuses on the lives of two African-American women, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield. Clare, who is living as a white, is married to John Bellew, an unabashed racist who does not know that Clare is black. Irene Redfield passes as white on occasion: indeed, Irene and Clare meet for the first time since childhood when, while visiting Chicago, they encounter each other in the act of passing at a restaurant on the roof of the elegant Drayton Hotel. Irene is married to Brian, a black physician, with whom she has two sons. She is immersed in the social life of Harlem's Sugar Hill elite and devoted to her children, although the secure contours of her life are revealed as a facade when we learn of her husband's persistent disaffection with New York and desire to live in Brazil. Clare moves to New York and renews her friendship with Irene. Placing at risk her dual roles as wife of a wealthy white man and mother of that man's daughter, Clare visits Harlem frequently to socialize with the Redfields and their friends. Irene is fascinated by the glamorous Clare. However, because she believes that her husband is attracted to Clare, Irene also is wary of her as a potential threat to her marriage. She becomes increasingly disturbed by Clare's visits. One evening, Clare's husband follows her to a Harlem party and discovers her subterfuge. With Irene standing at Clare's side, her hand on Clare's arm, Clare either jumps or is pushed to her death from a window. Unresolved in the novella's

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[9] For Butler, to the extent that cultural norms "produce inapproximable ideals" they are "haunted by their own inefficacy" (237). Abjected others who are on the receiving end of what Girard has called *interdividual* violence can exploit this inefficacy, "working weakness in the norm," in order to "inhabit the practices of its rearticulation" (237). Precisely because there is no one ideal (*the* African-American; *the* white woman) which could be summoned by mimetic desire, an "array of identificatory sites" emerges with desire (239). Their variability promises maneuvering room for a critical consciousness that would challenge deeply ingrained cultural practices of acquisitive and sacrificial mimesis on behalf of social change.

conclusion is Irene's role in Clare's death: "what happened next, Irene Redfield
never afterward allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. One moment
Clare had been here . . . . The next she was gone" (239).

With *Passing*, an otherwise predictable tale of the tragic mulatto explodes
into a compelling analysis of mimesis as Larsen offers a nuanced and
sophisticated portrait of institutionalized racism and the construction of
identity within it.[10] As Butler observes in writing on *Passing*, people in
Larsen's work are not identified principally as "white" or "black" (170). The
absence of racial *identity*, however, is not simply a function of Clare's routine
or Irene's occasional passing as white. Rather, race functions in the story only
for those persons who are "able to read a marked body in relation to unmarked
bodies, where unmarked bodies constitute the currency of normative
whiteness" (Butler 170). Clare doesn't pass as white because she has light
skin, but because she is part of a daily performance in which "she refuses to
introduce her blackness into conversations" (Butler 171). So also does Irene
pass when, frequenting places where whiteness is supposed (e.g., the Drayton
Hotel), she does not introduce "blackness" to the scene. Both Clare and Irene
can "pass" because race is established and maintained only in the context of
a complex citation process.

This process is most visible when the reader notes that Clare succeeds in
convincing her husband that she is white, even though Bellew calls her "Nig."
Race, a semantic mark that Bellew and Clare banter about in their
conversations, is wholly under their control. Explaining the nickname to Irene,
Bellew declares:

> Well, you see, it's like this. When we were first married, she
> was as white as—as—well as white as a lily. But I declare
> she's gettin' darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out,
> she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a
> nigger. (171)

Even when Clare quizzes directly Bellew about the offending appellation,
asking him if it would make a difference to him if he were to find out she was

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[10] According to Wall, the theme of the tragic mulatto was the "most accessible convention"
on which Larsen could draw in portraying middle-class, black women. But Larsen subverts the
convention. Rather than emphasize long-suffering nobility under conditions of oppression,
Larsen focuses on "the impossibility of self-definition" for women who seek to "navigate
between racial and cultural polarities," refusing "ladyhood" and the "exotic female other" (Wall,
1995, 89).

"one or two per cent coloured," Bellew's commitment to the terms of their relationship is clear:

> "Oh, no, Nig," he declared, "nothing like that with me. . . .
> You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned,
> since I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that. No
> niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be.
> (171)

If Bellew is white, Clare cannot possibly be black. But just as Clare is dependent for her white identity on the force of Bellew's mimetic desire, so also is Bellew dependent for his whiteness on his capacity to mark "the other" as black (Butler 173). Even as he disavows Clare's blackness he insistently claims it so as to articulate by disavowal his own pure identity. Writes Butler, Bellew "reproduces that racial line by which he seeks to secure his whiteness through producing black women as the necessary and impossible object of desire, as the fetish in relation to which his own whiteness is anxiously and persistently secured" (173). Only when Bellew follows Clare to Harlem and spies her standing among her black friends, can Bellew see her as black. In that context, the sign they mutually have refused proves inescapable. In Harlem, conversational markers definitively construct Clare as black.

On multiple counts, the relationship between Clare and Bellew attests to the mimetic contours of racism, as illuminated by Girardian theory. The repetitive dynamics of abjection—held in place by the refusal of signs of race—are clearly depicted in their relationship. Moreover, that racism courses violently beneath the genteel currents of upper-middle class white society is dramatically illustrated by Bellew's use of a racial epithet as a term of endearment. Finally, the narrative demonstrates the salvific aspects of mimeticized racism for Bellew: "the other" whom he refuses, but on whom he depends for his own being, promises to fill the lack that he is. Bellew's final words to Clare—"Nig! My God! Nig!" (239)—which he screams as Clare plummets from the window, attest more to that loss of being than to anger over deception.

The dynamics of mimesis are visible also in Clare and Irene's relationship. Jacquelyn McLendon (159), Cheryl Wall (1995, 130), and Thadious Davis (311) observe that Clare and Irene are doubles. Indeed, apart from Irene's "own projections of 'otherness,'" little is known of Clare (Wall 1986, 108). Negotiated along axes of race, gender, and sexuality, the dynamics of desire that Larsen records envelop Irene and Clare and shape their social roles.

From the moment of their initial meeting at the hotel, Irene is spellbound by this "lovely creature" (151) whom she finds "strange and compelling:" Clare's "lips, painted a brilliant geranium-red, were sweet and sensitive and a little obstinate. A tempting mouth . . . . and the eyes were magnificent! Dark, sometimes absolutely black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes" (161). Yet, however drawn Irene is to Clare, Irene struggles to distance herself from her. Declaring that Clare is "catlike"(144), Irene believes that, behind the "ivory mask" (157), hides a "creature utterly strange and apart" (172). Indeed, for all their "warmth" and capacity to "mesmerize," Clare's eyes have something "secret" about them: they are "Negro eyes! Mysterious and concealing" (161). Clare is fascinating. But also she is the monstrous double by whom Irene is repulsed. Torn between veneration and rejection, subject and model follow desire along its course, until a crisis brings to an end the quest for being.

Significantly, Larsen tracks desire at multiple levels in *Passing*, embracing personal relationships and cultural institutions. In passing, Clare is everything that Irene is not, and Irene finds her performance both enticing and wholly repugnant. Passing "excites our contempt," muses Irene, "and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it" (186). As a consequence, Clare's whiteness, held in place precisely through the play of desire—Bellew's and Irene's alike—becomes an object of Irene's regard.

Notwithstanding her ambivalence about passing, Irene clearly is attracted to whiteness: white values, white standards of beauty, white behavior (Davis 326). Adhering to bourgeois codes of behavior, Irene constantly imitates whites (McLendon 158). Delicate china tea cups, omnipresent images on the pages of *Passing,* are signs not only of Irene's middle-class gentility but of racial privilege. Indeed, as mimetic conflict intensifies between Irene and Clare, a tea cup serves to remind the reader of the complex parameters of Irene's desire. Angered by Clare's perceived flirting with male guests, Irene drops one of the fragile cups. But the reader is discouraged by Larsen from reading the scene only in terms of jealousy set in play by the dynamics of erotic desire. The shattered cup also interjects a racially marked sign into the conversation when Irene observes to a white friend that she will not miss it: "it was the ugliest thing that your ancestors, the charming Confederates, ever owned" (222).[11]

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[11] Butler emphasizes elements of lesbian attraction (174-180) between Irene and Clare. Her interpretation casts serious doubt on one standard interpretation of *Passing*. That interpretation

Although she is ambivalent about her racial status, Irene regularly does appeal to "the race," citing the social standards she is determined to uphold and from which she seeks to benefit in terms of upward mobility. But racial uplift so defined will be achieved by Irene only at a truly deadly price. Indeed, in establishing race as a mimetic construct held in place by bourgeois class ideals and white patriarchal norms, Larsen describes a praxis of race that, for Irene, is always potentially violent and murderous.

Initially however, mimetic currents in this praxis seem to place Clare, rather than Irene, at greatest risk. After all, Clare *is* only *in* passing. Moreover, in passing, Clare is doubly dependent on Irene. Irene maintains for Clare a *blackness* with which Clare flirts on visits to Sugar Hill. So too does Irene secure Clare's *whiteness* against exposure, especially when Irene travels outside Harlem. Were Irene to encounter Bellew in his world and find herself unable to summon a reserve of whiteness sufficient to pass, Irene could jeopardize Clare's fragile status. Knowing of Clare's friendship with Irene, Bellew could draw further associations: Clare could become the "Nig" Bellew previously only jokingly has invoked in his conversations with her.

But were Bellew to have such a chance encounter with Irene, Irene would be at risk as well. A mimetic crisis would ensue that, born of Irene's doubling with Clare, would shatter Irene. After all, Irene's blackness, normed through her invocation of "the race," has been secured because Clare always has succeeded in passing as white. Irene would confront a radical loss of being were Bellew, suspicions aroused and on the trail of deception, to hunt Clare down in Harlem in order to accuse her. Although Clare would be the immediate target of epithets that would ricochet off the walls of Irene's carefully constructed world, Bellew's slurs would destroy Irene as well. No longer a member of "the race," Irene would be "Nig."

Laying the groundwork for the development of just such a mimetic crisis, Larsen describes with acuity the vapid emptiness of Irene's and Clare's lives. Sacrificial currents course beneath those lives, but violence is conveyed indirectly. Ever attentive to details of fashion and decor, Larsen dutifully

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suggests that Larsen's efforts to write about racism fail midway through *Passing* when Larsen's powerful critique gives way to the banal representation of a love triangle (Wall 1986, 105). Under Butler's tutelage, the reader comes to see that this love triangle belongs not to Larsen, but to Irene, who toys with heterosexual jealousy in order to hide from herself the true aim of her desire: Clare. Butler demonstrates that, in subverting the reader's expectations for the text and multiplying the trajectories of desire within it, Larsen makes room for a serious consideration of the complexities of mimetic desire (176). Those complexities include diverse erotic attractions; they encompass also the dynamics of racism in American society.

records Irene's and Clare's endless rounds of shopping, charity balls, and tea parties, skillfully evoking the stultifying power of bourgeois existence. While Irene resolutely and almost desperately clings to that life, despite widespread evidence that her husband and sons find it deadly, Clare's own family is perpetually at risk. That risk's most radicalized moment is signified by Clare's daughter, Margery. Had Margery been born darker than her mother, like a flaw marring an otherwise perfectly white veneer, she would have evinced a power to destroy Clare. Even though Margery has light skin, Clare's life and hers remain perilously entwined. If Clare's racial deception is discovered by Bellew, she will lose Margery. Even so, Clare faces the prospect of exposure with what Irene perceives as wholly reprehensible sanguinity. Queried by Irene about the impact on Margery if Clare should be "found out" by Bellew, Clare responds:

> "Margery?" Clare repeated, letting her eyes flutter over Irene's concerned face. "just this, 'Rene. If it wasn't for her, I'd do it anyway. She's all that holds me back. But if Jack finds out, if our marriage is broken, that lets me out. Doesn't it?" (234)

Clare's casual regard for her daughter makes Clare the anti-mother to Irene's mother. However, that the maternal face of each woman is bound by the racism and sexism, is in fact produced by these twin forces, makes their mimetic conflict a stunning portrait of the sacrificial contours of these two systems.

Mimetic conflict escalates when Irene comes to think of her double as a threat to her marriage. Believing that Brian is embarking on an affair with Clare, Irene is drawn to it even as she is repelled by its consequences. Irene observes her rival at work:

> Clare's husky voice floated over to her: ". . . always admired you . . . so much about you long ago . . . everybody says so . . . no one but you . . . ." . . . The man hung rapt on her words, though he was the husband of Felise Freeland, and the author of novels that revealed a man of perception and a devastating irony. And he fell for such pish-posh! And all because Clare had a trick of sliding down ivory lids over astonishing black eyes and then lifting them suddenly and turning on a caressing smile. Men like Dave Freeland fell for it. And Brian. . . .Rage boiled up in her. (221)

With Irene's suspicions aroused, the tension in the narrative is exacerbated by the deadly dynamics of betrayal. If Clare captures Irene's husband, she will "become" Irene. However, the closer Clare comes to achieving that goal, the more she endangers her life. Flirting with Harlem and Brian, Clare risks discovery by Bellew. Moreover, to the extent that Irene remains fascinated by Clare, identifying with Clare's high-wire act and desiring to become like her, even to become her, Irene too is in jeopardy. She risks losing that fragile construct of negative racial identity on which her life has been based.

As *Passing* approaches its denouement, Irene encounters Bellew while shopping with a friend. Bellew stands incredulous before her, looking from Irene to "Felise, golden, with curly black Negro hair, whose arm is still linked in her own" (226). Irene knows that this chance meeting places Clare at profound risk. As Clare's double, so also is Irene at risk. But Irene chooses not to warn Clare. The reader is told that Irene's primary concern is to protect herself against loss if Clare, rejected by Bellew, proceeds with her conquest of Brian. However, in the escalating tension of the narrative, the play of desire exceeds the boundaries of that well-worn, romantic script. Irene matches Clare's ruthlessness moment for moment. As the mimetic conflict reaches crisis proportions, no limits are placed on it. Muses Irene about what might transpire in the wake of Clare's exposure by Bellew: "anything might happen. Anything" (236).

In the end, if Clare is killed by what she knows and knowingly rejects—white racism implicated in heterosexual marriage bonds—Irene dies a kind of death as well. Apart from Clare, her double to the end, Irene is wholly incapable of confronting the lack that she is and living on. The world that Clare and Irene have shared—their single mimeticized identity—collapses. On learning that Clare is dead, Irene falls to the ground: "through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark" (242). The mirrored passing of Clare and Irene becomes their passing on (Gates, 202).

IV. Conclusion

What are the lessons of mimesis in *Passing*? I would like to believe that they are two-fold, implicating the text and the reader alike. On the one hand, the narrative appears to illustrate, in a most compelling manner, Girard's mimetic theory. Irene/Clare, a divided subject, is the creation of a racist, classist society. In her/their existence is exposed a larger mimetic apparatus in which gender, race, and class still draw their negative vitality. A tale of

extended violence and reciprocal abjection, *Passing* links the dynamics of desire on individual and institutional levels, creating a powerful portrait of mimeticized racism.   Displaying race rituals in all their repetitive and suffocating detail, Larsen skillfully conveys the complex dynamics of mimesis. Further, although such rites generally hide from direct view their origin in acquisitive and sacrificial mimesis, in situations of crisis, exemplified in the dramatic conclusion of *Passing*, that origin is exposed. In that revelation, *Passing* offers powerful tutelage for a critical consciousness, suggesting ways in which that consciousness can challenge subjective investments in racism.

On the other hand, *Passing* appears to offer readers opportunities also to apply the insights of mimetic theory to their efforts to read and interpret a work of literature. However, these opportunities may remain unrealized if, in thrall to acquisitive mimesis, readers treat *Passing* as an object of their desire. Their investments in mimesis may work against critical consciousness, reinforcing racism.

The text itself speaks to the danger that the white gaze poses for African-American culture and its artistic creations. Describing for Clare the white elite that throngs in ever increasing numbers to Harlem and its cultural life (e.g., the Negro Welfare League ball), Irene comments: pretty soon so many whites will come that "the coloured people won't be allowed in at all" (198). Clare, ostensibly mystified by the intensifying white interest in black life, asks, "What do they come for?" Responds Irene, "Same reason you're here, to see Negroes" (198). If white readers are wholly in the thrall of acquisitive mimesis, then, like their counterparts in *Passing* who flock to Harlem, white readers will read *Passing* only to "see Negroes." Reading on, they will repeat rituals of race privilege.

I contend, however, that white readers can "re-member" and not only repeat mimesis when they respond to *Passing.* This opportunity arises, but not because the protagonists—Clare and Irene become sacrificial trophies who save white readers from themselves by exposing and educating whites to their own racism. White readers who hope to seize lessons in race privilege from *Passing* do risk acquisitive mimesis. However, because Clare and Irene are doubles and because the circumstances of Clare's death remain ambiguous, *Passing* eludes white readers' ready grasp. Instead, *Passing* "works weakness" in expected conventions of interpretation. As a consequence, Larsen models for her reader a critical performance of difference that creates opportunities for readers to renegotiate mimesis.

This performance, deployed in the text itself, has affinities with the Barbara Johnson's strategy of narrative interpretation, cited earlier. Johnson,

we recall, perceives that, in interpreting Hurston, she must exchange a set agenda for an open-ended one. She must be willing to look for answers to questions she does not even know that she is unable to formulate (Awkward 86). When asking questions of race and *Passing,* white readers can frame their inquiry in like ways. They too can express a willingness to look for answers to questions that previously they have not realized they have been unable to formulate.

Readers can effect such a critical stance when they exchange the formulaic question—how did Clare die?—for more open-ended reflection. The text does allude to Irene's complicity in Clare's death. Moments before Clare plunges to her death, Irene flicks ashes from her cigarette onto the same pavement on which Clare's body, previously a "vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold" (239), will soon come to rest, broken and cold with death. But ambiguities in the narrative—partial sentences and incomplete thoughts—maintain an uncertainty to which readers can remain attentive. Was it an accident? Suicide? Homicide? Muses Irene initially, "What would the others think: That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backward? Certainly one or the other. Not . . ." (239). And moments later Irene whispers fiercely, "it was an accident, a terrible accident" (239) .

Rejecting ambiguity, some readers may insist on resolution and satisfaction from the text. However, as Claudia Tate argues, if readers do so, they force "the work to fit the demand of critical expectations rather than allow the work to engender meaningful critical response" (146). Persistent ambiguities in *Passing,* sustaining efforts of readers who want to intercept acquisitive mimesis and forestall its sacrificial moment, enable them to relinquish their grasp on the text. Where ambiguities in the text pose difficulties for readers who, in thrall to desire, intend a single, unified stance toward the text, readers who effect a critical consciousness honor the ambiguities. As variable patterns of desire emerge in *Passing,* "working weakness" in interpretive norms, maneuvering room emerges for a critical consciousness that could challenge deeply ingrained cultural practices and patterns of identity formation.

Barbara Johnson's model of narrative interpretation also helpfully builds on Tate, furthering critical consciousness. Just as Tate would dissuade readers from forcing answers from the text about what "really happened" to Clare, so Johnson would dissuade readers from appealing to a reader's racial insider/outsider status when legitimating or challenging interpretations of *Passing.* Such approaches to narrative interpretation, from a perspective informed by Tate or Johnson, tether mimetic conflict to the secure pole of self-

knowledge, but only at a high price: they sacrifice otherness. As a consequence, these approaches do not further critical consciousness. By contrast, critical consciousness is enhanced when readers engage the text in ways that acknowledge the raced, classed, and gendered divisions in being which diverse interpretations of *Passing* record, while understanding also that these divisions are ongoing and interminable. Attuning their exercises in interpretation to a critical reiteration of mimetic patterns, which previously have drawn on practices of exclusion to norm race, class, and gender, readers can honor what is irreconcilable in the work of mimesis. Their regard for difference, honed as a critical skill, may enable them to re-member mimesis rather than only repeat it. Forestalling sacrifice, they will model a serious engagement with racism.

Clearly, Girard's mimetic theory contributes to such an exercise. It offers suggestive possibilities for members of dominant groups who want to "work through racism" in order to accept repressed aspects of their being and relinquish their grip on iterative expressions of race privilege. When applied to the narrative and reading of *Passing*, for example, Girard's theory illuminates key subjective investments persons make in racism. Offering insights into how racism functions in subject formation and maintenance, Girard's theory enables members of dominant groups to remain attentive also to the links that bind individuals and cultural institutions. Enhancing their knowledge of the mimetic structure of racism, Girard's theory, in multiple respects, promotes a critical consciousness that Elliot associates with effective anti-racist work.

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A PARABLE OF SCANDAL: SPECULATIONS ABOUT THE WHEAT AND THE TARES IN MATTHEW 13

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> I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret
> since the foundation of the world"
>
> (Matthew 13:35)

The title of one of René Girard's path-breaking books, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, is of course drawn from this passage. Few scholarly writings compare to this discussion of mimetic rivalry and collective persecution for conveying a sense of the Bible's depths and secrecy, and for deciphering the wisdom inscribed in its images. Yet it is curious that Girard eschews the parables said to be the repositories of scriptural secrets. Both in *Things Hidden* (189) and in *Quand ces choses commenceront* (171-172), he distances himself from the parables as conceding too much to the human desire for a mythical God of retribution. In light of all we have learned from Girard about our traditional misreadings of the Gospel, we might well question even the strongest impressions left by some of its figures. Might the parables' language of apocalyptic vengeance conceal a different revelation, just as an innocent death on a cross should disclose not the bloodlust of a deity but the violence of men?

Matthew's Jesus tells a story about a sower whose crop was infested by his enemy's weeds, weeds to be uprooted and destroyed at the harvest. And, granted, when Jesus translates the parable for the disciples he describes divine violence at the end of history. The enemy is the devil and the sower is the Son of Man who sends out his angels to discern the unrighteous of humanity and cast them into the furnace. But something does not seem quite right. Isn't Jesus' reduction of his own parable a little too obvious? And is there not

something grotesque—or at least simple-minded—about the teacher who warned about throwing pearls of wisdom now turning around and broadcasting the solution to one of the great mysteries? If we look closely at the very parable that surrounds the suggestion of "things hidden since the foundation of the world," we may see, however, that something is indeed hidden, hidden in the text. And what is hidden there confirms Girard's insight about the dominion of mimetic rivalry since the world began. The Wheat and Tares is more than a myth of divine punishment. It is a parable of the essential human malady, a parable of scandal.

Here is the main text of the parable of the Wheat and the Tares, from Matthew chapter 13, in the New King James Version.[1]

> "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good
> seed in his field (*agroi*) but while men slept, his enemy came
> and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when
> the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also
> appeared. So the servants of the [master of the house]
> (*oikodespotou*) came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow
> good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said
> to them, 'An enemy, [a man,] has done this.' The servants said
> to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But
> he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot
> the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest,
> and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather
> together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but
> gather the wheat into my barn."'" (Matthew 13: 24-30)

And here is the explanation of the Wheat and the Tares that follows soon after:

> All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables;
> and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might
> be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet saying: "I will
> open my mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret
> [since] the foundation of the world."

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[1] Minor corrections, necessary to reflect the Greek, are indicated by brackets. The source for the Greek text is the *Nestle-Almond Novum Testamentum Graece*.

> Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house (*oikian*). And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." He answered and said to them:
>
> "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world (*kosmos*), the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend (*skandala*), and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Matthew 13: 34-43)

Now Jesus' interpretation of his parable, reserving the light and fire for the end of the age, at least takes the resolution of human conflicts out of human hands. But it is really doing more. The disciples may be relieved that the trouble in the world will be gathered into a mass of evil to be burned. But if we compare the two texts closely, Jesus' explanation has actually gone beyond this simple representation in the parable. He identifies the tares as the "sons of the wicked one" but then further *divides this evil into two categories*. According to the text, the angels of the Son of Man gather from his kingdom both the "things that offend" and "those who practice lawlessness." This sudden division calls for careful consideration. One possibility is that Jesus is subtly correcting a presumption of his disciples, perhaps a natural presumption to conceive of evil as a unified thing or type of person. The disciples specifically ask him to explain "...the parable of *the tares of the field,*" as if to say that, since the tares are the problem, let us hear what is going to happen to them. But Jesus surprises them. The tares represent two different things: there are lawless people, on the one hand, and there are all the *things that offend* (*skandala*), on the other.

This new distinction is disturbing. Granted, the part announcing the demise of lawless people sounds clear enough. But the other term of the distinction—the offensive things that are also destroyed—is more unsettling in its vagueness. Are the things that offend offenses committed against us?

Or are they things we find offensive in other people but that are not necessarily unlawful? Perhaps the term refers to the differences among individuals or classes of individuals, differences that spark hostility but that are not in themselves controlled by law. Could it even refer to differences of religious belief that do not necessarily entail lawlessness? This list of possibilities is, of course, speculative; but the text seems to call for speculation. The category "things that offend"—*gratuitously* introduced in the "official explanation"—seems calculated to raise a question about our acts of censure and condemnation.

In fact, these speculations about the "things that offend" are within the range of meanings that the word *skandala* acquires in the New Testament.[2] As Girard has well demonstrated, scandal is one of the most important concepts in these scriptures. It may be worth our trouble to review its meaning. *Skandalizo* is thought to come from words for limping and lameness, and means to ensnare someone in a trap, to cause him to stumble and fall. One expresses something of *skandalizo* in the English phrase "to bait someone," which derives from the same metaphor of snaring animals.[3] Now to scandalize someone in the biblical sense—to cause someone to fall, to cause someone to sin—is an odd sort of action. Even in the active voice, it is really a negative kind of action, a power of inciting someone else's ability to hurt himself. Of course this is condemned in the Bible. But what is striking is that, not only this negative action of ensnaring but also—this is important—*becoming the victim of snares is disapproved.*[4] The point is not to decide that those who trap are bad and those who get tripped are good, but to expose the *whole seduction* of antagonism—to warn about both of the ways that individuals become involved in, even defined by conflict.[5]

Jesus may therefore be saying more than first appears when he states that, at the Apocalypse, the *skandala* are removed before the separation of the righteous and the unrighteous. It is as if human definitions of righteous and

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[2] See, for example, Romans 14:13, I Corinthians 8:7-13 and 10:32; and McCracken (14-21, 28-31, 34-40), who brings out several senses of scandal.

[3] At the same time, this moral psychology can be reflected in a different New Testament word for stumbling, *proskopto* (John 11:9, Romans 14:13, 1 Corinthians 10:32, Philippians 1:10).

[4] For examples of active and passive uses of even the noun *skandalon*, cf. Romans 14:13 and 1 John 2:10. One is not to "make something" of differences—neither to place "obstacles" (e.g. judgments) nor to suppose or react to others placing them.

[5] Besides the examples that follow in this essay (Matthew 13:21, 18:6, John 6:61), see also Matthew 17:27, Luke 17:1-4, and 1 Corinthians 8:9.

unrighteous will only have exemplified the very scandal, the mutual antagonism, that people failed to understand. Perhaps it is no accident that, in Jesus' "explanation" of the parable, the righteous themselves shine forth *only after* some wailing and gnashing of teeth—that is, after they (the "righteous") have been purged of their indignation!

In any case, the traditional translations of *skandala*—"the things that offend"(KJV) and "the causes of sin"(RSV)—make new sense. The word describes all those things that get between people, those obstacles they place or simply imagine between themselves, those ways they trip one another up. It describes the triggers to negative and reactive behaviors, the exchange of accusations and resentments, the need for revenge and triumph. Scandal covers a multitude of sins. For it traces them to a common delusion in which deceivers are themselves deceived, the blind ensnare the blind. We may see why the biblical texts focus, not so much on *who* is responsible for these entanglements, as on *how to become* responsible, and resist the wearisome game. This is one meaning of Jesus' call to whoever "has ears to hear:" it is a call to responsibility.

The act of hearing, indeed, is the subject of the first parable in Matthew's Gospel, the one right before the parable of Wheat and Tares.[6] This parable, too, shows the centrality to this chapter of that delusive entanglement with others that is summarized in the term "scandal." It is also a parable of a sower, thematically related to the story of the tares. In this previous parable the sower sows seed: some falls by the wayside and is gobbled up by birds, some falls among stony places and springs up but gets scorched by the sun because it has no depth of earth, some falls among choking thorns, and some on good ground that yields a rich crop. Now when Jesus explains this parable, he mentions scandal specifically with regard to the seed that gets scorched by the sun after falling on shallow earth and stones. This is the person who hears the word

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[6] "Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty..." (Matthew 13: 3-8). "Therefore hear the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles (*skandalizetai*)" (Matthew 13:18-21).

with some enthusiasm but who, because he "has no root in himself" (13:21), does not persist with it. When trouble or persecution arises, Jesus states, he "stumbles," he is "offended" or "scandalized" *(skandalizetai).*

Of course, the way the Greek verb works, one cannot necessarily distinguish whether the stumbler is tripped by someone else or trips himself.[7] That is indeed the case here: the man gets tripped up, he gets all entangled. One is not sure whether to focus on the other's action or the man's reaction. Jesus speaks with deliberate ambiguity, it would seem, because *the image in his parable preserves the same ambiguity.* According to the figure, each type of person *is* the type of ground, good or bad, that receives the seed. The scandalized man *is* that shallow earth *with the stones in it.* The stones he stumbles on, therefore, are not other people simply, but something of other people that has got *into him.* They are his internalization of the others, his surrender to them of the power of judgment, represented by stones—the ones they might well throw.[8] But Jesus has not explained this parable of different ways of hearing to teach that the scandalized man is simply the unfortunate victim of others. He need not have adopted the persecutors' perspective. The man "has no root in himself"—these are Jesus' words. The man is liable to be offended "immediately" (13:21)—that is, without having to be given much cause. The way an individual unwittingly complies with a persecutor, the way his or her reaction allows the victimization to work—this is what is suggested by the figure as well as by the Greek that Matthew chooses.

Before returning to the details of the parable of the Wheat and the Tares, we should notice another way in which the problem of scandal haunts this chapter of Matthew. The whole scene—Jesus telling the parable to a crowd and then offering its explanation to "insiders,"—flirts with scandal. In fact, this blatant division of disciples and crowd occurs twice in this chapter of Matthew, and at the first occasion (coming between the parable of the Sower and that of the Wheat and Tares) Jesus seems to dwell on the distinction. The disciples ask him why he speaks in parables, and he responds at length:

> "...it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will

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[7] *Scandalizetai* is both the middle and the passive voice, so the passive sense of being acted upon by another and the reflexive sense of action on oneself are indistinguishable.

[8] On lapidation and autolapidation, see Girard 1986 (165-183).

be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see but not perceive; for the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should, understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them.' But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." (Matthew 13:11-17)

Now if the reader understands this to mean that one's capacity to be enlightened by the text is somehow determined by a mysterious pre-selection of souls, then this would itself be an obstacle or scandal. On the other hand, if the reader assumes that this division in souls automatically favors his or her discipleship, that reader has easily settled into that sense of spiritual superiority that is scandal, and fallen into the snare of the text. It is possible, however, to conceive a different sense in the distinction between disciples and crowds. It is possible that Matthew means to invite readers into some more intimate relation with Jesus' discourse, which indeed would be discipleship. But only after a more arduous journey into the text—and into their own potential for scandal. This journey would lead to deeper reflection about the difference between good and evil. It would lead to seeing precisely that scandal creates much of that difference. But again, this would come only after thoughtful consideration of the details of Matthew's writing. If we return to the comparison of the parable and Jesus' explanation of it, we see how re-reading invites us, step by step, into this radical reflection.[9]

If we continue to compare the images of the parable of the Wheat and the Tares with Jesus' list of their apocalyptic meanings, we notice another curious point. Jesus' "explanation" does not in fact identify all the main figures of the original parable. He tells about the Son of Man and the devil, about the sons of the kingdom and of the wicked one, and about a new world purged by

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[9] Regarding Matthew's termination of scripture's secrecy within the disciple's own secret inwardness, see Derrida (100-109).

angels. But Jesus neglected to identify the "servants of the owner."[10] They appear not to be reapers; for the owner in the parable tells the servants not even to weed and tells them what he will later say to the reapers. Whoever they are, these servants raise the central question of the parable. They ask why the field has tares if the owner sowed good seed. They ask about the existence of "bad people" in the world. We shall see further on how this omission of the servants from the parable's purported explanation reflects the reader's own movement into the text. In the meantime, we cannot fail to feel that Jesus' "explanation" of the parable, ironically by what it fails to explain, raises our interest in his story.

Indeed, looking back to the parable, and reconsidering the owner's answer to his servants, one sees him already saying more than that moral difference will be sorted out at the end of time. He is telling the servants something about good and evil worth thinking about. He says they must not uproot the tares because that may also uproot the wheat. Men cannot necessarily tell the wheat and tares apart—so the traditional reading goes—because the two species look alike.[11] But the master's speech has a more radical implication. Evil might be essentially mimetic. And it will take some deep knowledge of root-systems to help care for this field.

It is Matthew's text itself that encourages one to dig deeper. The rest of Jesus' discourse to the disciples exhibits no little interest in what lies below surfaces. Here is what directly follows Jesus' "explanation" of the parable, which we cited above:

> "*Again*, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure (*thesauroi*) hidden in a field (*agroi*), which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. *Again*, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it. *Again*, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into

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[10] Compare other episodes of Jesus as a trickster, whose tricks always have interesting meanings: John 20:15, and Luke 24:1-53.

[11] Biblical dictionaries agree in defining the Greek word for tares (*zizania*) as a plant resembling wheat. E.g. Joseph Henry Thayer (272); William Arndt and F. W. Gingrich (340); and *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (II, 816).

vessels but threw the bad away. So it will be at the end of the
age. The angels will come forth, separate [the evil] from
among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There
will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

Jesus said to them, "Have you [discerned] (*syneikate*) all
these things?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." Then he said to
them, "Therefore every scribe instructed (*grammateus
matheteutheis*) concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a
[master of a house] (*oikodespotei*) who [puts forth] out of his
treasure (*thesaurou*) things new and old." (Matthew 13:44-52,
italics added)

As readers continue on to these passages, they could easily assume that Jesus
is finished with the explanation of the Wheat and Tares and has suddenly, for
some reason, begun a new series of parables. But Jesus' introduction of each
image with "again" suggests that this is not the case. Moreover, his
concluding question to the disciples expresses a general summing up. "Have
you *discerned (syneikate) all these things*?" he asks. Jesus has been
continuously and privately instructing the disciples, who need to "discern"—or
"put together," according to another definition of *syneikate*[12]—his
accumulated meaning. "Have you put together all these things?" On a stricter
reading, one sees that these paragraphs continue Jesus' answer to the disciples'
single request, to explain the "parable of the tares," after he dispatches the
multitude. Under the simplistic supposition that Jesus' point is only to identify
the figures in the parable with figures in the Apocalypse, the reader mentally
truncates Jesus' private explanation of the story (as we did in our initial
quotations). But there is only one lesson here and it continues. These new
little parables are *part of the commentary* on the Wheat and the Tares: they
are parables interpreting the original parable.[13]

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[12] The verb *synieimi* carries not only the sense of "send/make come together" but also the
metaphorical sense of "to put together," viz., gather the inward sense of outward images.

[13] David McCracken, in *The Scandal of the Gospels*, is also interested in the narrative unity
of Matthew 13. But in the end he declines to offer an overall reading: "Parables assert no
messages"(106). Parables invite the reader to project his or her desire into the text, they lead to
aporiai, and to the Kierkegaardian either/or. In contrast, this study proposes that anomalies in
Jesus' private "explanation" of his parable are highly significant and that his private comments
on it extend further to a sequence of subtle connections and corrections to the parable that
complete a positive and unified teaching.

In this light, the "treasure hidden in the field (*agroi*)" that commences the sequence of additional parables (verse 44), is not an independent figure. It can refer to what the reader will find in the field (*agros*) mentioned in the main parable if he or she keeps digging. The next little parable referring to precious pearls continues the theme of "hidden treasure," and the one after that about the dragnet cast into the sea may be another quest for such pearls. These new images all indicate some great discovery and are connected to one another as Jesus' final question implies.

Jesus' words following the little parable must also be enlisted in the reader's search. Indeed they give the best hint toward an interpretation of the entire episode. Jesus says that when his listeners have "put together" his discourse they can be likened to "master(s) of a house" (*oikodespotei*) bringing out new and old items from their treasure. The word Jesus uses for the new master is the same word (*oikodespotes*) he used for the landowner in the original parable, the man who sowed good seed. The implication is that *the discerning disciple could become like the master of the house in the very parable Jesus has been explaining.* In the original parable, the landowner who sowed the wheat turned out to be the Son of Man, the divine essence of human beings which Jesus presumably reveals.[14] Now if the disciples should finally become metaphorical landowners, they become in some way Sons of Man. They become increasingly like Jesus. This appears to be confirmed by the single dramatic action in the episode. Before sharing the inward teaching, Jesus indeed goes "into the house" (*eis ten oikian*), to be followed voluntarily by his friends. As if to say: yes, the disciples might become masters of a spiritual world like the householder in the story.

The whole sense of the parable thus shifts from Jesus as master of human beings at the end of time to Jesus as model of human beings now. It would shift from a teaching for the crowd, that speaks to the crowd's concern (their scandalous concern about the ultimate fate of "bad" people), to a teaching directed at the individual disciple, that speaks to and about him. The original parable suggested a meaning for the individual by its opening: "The kingdom of heaven is like *a man* who sowed good seed in his field." But this personal meaning was not followed up in the "official explanation," Jesus' listing the apocalyptic identities of the characters. Only now, in this latter part of his private discourse which encourages us to dig deeper, does the movement of the

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[14] Reading (with Crossan) the "Son of Man" as the truly human, based on Daniel 7:13. See Crossan (160-1). Regarding the "Son of Man" as man in his fullness, man created in God's image, see Ellul (104) as well as John 12:34-36 and 19:6.

disciples away from the crowd and into the house become significant. The kingdom is within and it is now.

How do the disciples enter the kingdom? This question is not so different from the unanswered question about the role of the servants in the original parable. It is to ask how individuals cope with evil, how they become helpers of the Son of Man? Indeed, when the few disciples follow Jesus to inquire about the "parable of the tares," they resemble the parable's servants asking their master about the tares in the field. Yet Jesus hints that the disciples, if they become more discerning, might eventually resemble more the master. This shift in the mimetic lines of force suggests an alternate way of reading the whole parable. Individuals who would identify with the Son of Man, the master of the cosmos, will become—rather than judges and accusers—masters in their own houses.[15]

On this alternate reading, the owner's field which officially symbolized the cosmos, would become the disciple's natural soul. The individual is *micro-*cosmos; the psyche, a partial mirror of the world. The wheat and tares are an individual's *own* entanglement of good and bad. Or better, one's natural potential is entangled with some imitative badness, in the obscure depths of one's soul. Individuals need to understand this in order to understand their own activity. They need to untangle this tangle of roots, if the knowledge of subterranean depths is to become a treasure. Thus would one become "master of his own house," a master who unpacks his treasure (*thesaurou*), as Jesus hints in his final remark. This mastery is not imaginable for the servants in the story. Their interests are detached from the master's. "Sir," they ask, "did *you* not sow good seed in *your* field?" For them, ultimate responsibility, like ownership, rests with the Management. But this attitude changes in the first small parable (13:44). A lucky man finds buried treasure (*thesauroi*) and goes to *purchase* the field and become a landowner.

One should not be surprised that Jesus' words refer to psychic depths and our appropriation of them. The Gospels commonly allude to mysteries of what we call the unconscious mind.[16] As observed above, in Matthew's earlier parable of a sower, the seed that represents receiving the word of the kingdom sinks roots *deep into the earth* to avoid being scorched by the sun. Jesus states that this represents being rooted in oneself (13:21). How much clearer could his advice get, that one become grounded in a hidden source within, and

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[15] Regarding Jesus as the positive model, see Girard 1987 (430).

[16] The argument for Jesus' psychoanalytic insights is well developed in Françoise Dolto, *L'Evangile au risque de la psychanalyse, Tomes I et II.*

shun the fanaticism of trying to move directly toward the light? Other Gospel lessons agree that the kingdom is not about conscious exertions. It is like a man scattering seed from which the wheat sprouts *without his knowing how* (Mark 4:27). It is like the lilies of the field, which flourish without anxiety and toil, without straining to raise their height (Matthew 6:27-28). Nonetheless, human beings may need a wisdom that liberates this effortless growth, a wisdom about how it becomes obstructed.

Is obstruction not the very lesson of the parable of Wheat and Tares? The master explains the tares to his servants: "An enemy, a man, has done this." A hostile man came to frustrate his work by sowing weeds that would entangle the wheat. The master explicitly makes the point that the enemy is *a man* like himself. It curiously calls attention to the phenomenon of rivalry and antagonism. And the entanglement of the wheat with tares—can this be anything else than the idea of *ensnarement* expressed in the idiom of plants? Jesus does not mention scandals until his "explanation," and then only as a hint. But the original parable was all along an intricate representation of scandal.

The cosmic and microcosmic levels work together in this picture of scandal. On the microcosmic level, the clandestine planting of weeds suggests that others' sin gets into a person subcutaneously and beyond one's control. Unacknowledged, this alien seed grows into a sin that is truly *the person's own*. Others are not responsible for that; it is for each person not to be the unwitting subject of others' power. But the individual's acquisition of full responsibility is one with his or her awakening to a larger problem. For, while the propagation of evil affects each on a personal level, it is always a mere episode in the unconscious and universal imitation by which people infect one another. This universal process, taken as an autonomous whole, is what the diabolical Enemy signifies on the cosmic plane.

With respect to the depiction of this universal process, notice that the Enemy comes *while men are sleeping*. Such a reference to every soul's unconsciousness brings especially to mind the psychological condition of children, their vulnerability before parents and other adults. Matthew's Gospel stresses the point. There Jesus preaches woe to "...whoever scandalizes (*skandalisei*) one of these little ones."(18:6)[17] So the parable, too, can be indicating the origination of evil in human lives, not as a defect transmitted

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[17] See Girard 1987 (417).

biologically, but as our shared susceptibility to the unconscious process of scandal.[18]

Incidentally, Shakespeare takes up the theme of the propagation of evil in the first scenes of *Hamlet*, and he similarly modifies the idea of original sin from a congenital defect to a problem of human influence. He has Hamlet discourse on the original flaw in human beings, poetically calling it a "mole of nature."(I.iv.24) But at that very moment the ghost of his father appears to him for the first time, to require of him the act of revenge. When the ghost burrows around in the earth under his feet, the amused Hamlet calls him an "old mole!"(I.v.162). Hamlet is unaware of his own play on words. But Shakespeare has taken the vague idea of a genetic flaw and depicted it as the nefarious moral collusion with the father. Again, this is not simply to blame parents but to see them as crucial links in the interpersonal chain of scandal. Anyone might consider how this has taken place in his or her own life. Such symbols allow for the widest application, the symbol of Hamlet's father-from-Hell burrowing into the ground he treads, no less than that of the Enemy in the parable secretly sowing weeds among the wheat.

One's application of the parable's symbolism might further follow the double-image of the world and the individual, the macrocosm and the microcosm. This double-image suggests that a genuine understanding of one's own scandals is not separable from an understanding of those in the world around one. Conversely, one's judgment of what goes on in the world necessarily reflects one's prior self-interrogation. Perhaps, in the same way, no one is isolated in a merely private guilt. The double disclosure, of self and world, implies a solidarity with others, founded on our common falling into scandals. Hence the genuine responsibility the individual takes on must be, as Dostoevsky taught,[19] a responsibility for a frailty that afflicts humanity as a whole. The identity between the disciple as microcosm and the Son of Man who cares for the macrocosm would be no vain metaphor.

But, like the servants in the parable, the disciple must learn just how thoroughly the tares have adulterated the present crop. The servants imagine that they could pull them up and remove them from the field. The master hints at the complications: the wheat and tares are not easily differentiated, and

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[18] For critical examinations of the doctrine of original sin, see the studies of F. R. Tennant, *Sources of the Doctrine of the Fall and Original Sin*, and Paul Ricoeur, "'Original Sin': A Study in Meaning," in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (269-286).

[19] The parable intimates something like the "responsibility of all for all" in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* (e.g. 320).

their roots are so intertwined that the servants had better not attempt a weeding. As a figure for the human situation this is hardly good news. We, along with the rest of the world, are more deeply entangled at the roots than we ordinarily realize, more than we can single-handedly expect to sort out. William Blake understood the problem, for he understood scandal to infect all social and cultural systems. What we call virtue, for example, is scandal insofar as virtue pursues moral superiority, the right of condemning transgressors.

> Our Moral Virtues ne'er can be,
>   Nor Warlike pomp & Majesty,
> For Moral Virtues all begin
> In the Accusations of Sin,
> *And all the Heroic Virtues End*
> *In destroying the Sinners' Friend.*[20]

(By the "Sinner's Friend," of course, Blake means Jesus.) The problem of the tares entangling our wheat signifies a legacy of scandal and imitation conditioning the soul. The twisted roots we need to unravel are nothing less than our false cultural and personal systems of the knowledge of good and evil.

Let us indicate better the Gospels' awareness of our false distinctions of good and evil—distinctions that are rather a function of our scandals. A provocative example comes up in the sixth chapter of John. A crowd has tracked Jesus down and is asking him for a truly spectacular sign like, for instance, delivering manna from heaven to eat. So Jesus announces that he is the bread of God to whom whoever comes will never hunger. A striking enough response. But the story becomes increasingly eerie. For Jesus does not proclaim just once that he is the bread of humankind, but he hammers the point five or six more times and in the rather too graphic terms of *eating his flesh and drinking his blood.* One might almost say "in unambiguous terms," but the effect is precisely to call attention a particular ambiguity. The speech of the new Manna, the speech about eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood, blurs deliberately into the subject of cannibalism. The disciples murmur, "This is a hard saying, who can listen to it?" Notice, Jesus pulls them up short. "Does this *offend* you?" he asks. Again the Greek word for "offend" is *skandalizei.* "Does this *scandalize* you?" (John 6:22-61).

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[20] William Blake, "The Everlasting Gospel," lines 31-36 (347). Italics represent Blake's additions in mss.

Of course Jesus refers to the possibility of human beings assimilating his spirit. But by linking this assimilation with cannibalism, and thus offending his audience, he displays their ordinary human insistence on easily separated moral categories which characterizes obvliousness to scandal. His listeners can only react to his ambiguous speech. They are offended and indignant, for they know themselves to be morally superior to the abominable suggestion of cannibalism. But this is a false distinction, and their offended reaction betrays them. Their "moral" reaction attests to the fact that *they* are already engaged in a kind of cannibalism. They tacitly incorporate "bad cannibals" into a moral system which makes judgment easy and the judges self-secure.[21] Jesus' shocking speech critiques such purported morality. All unconscious modes of *internalizing the other*, represented in the allusion to cannibalism, need to be examined. In the light of the revelation of scandal, the good and the bad of our moral systems are not so easy to tell apart. The human practice of eating other human beings seems only an overt expression of the code of revenge, a mere moment of the pervasive process of human antagonism. Jesus' speech again hints at the underlying problem. He offers himself as both the non-retaliating victim of human scandal and the model of its transcendence.

There is a curious resemblance running through these Gospel images. The stones in the earth which prevent a plant from taking firm root (Matthew's first parable), the tares' seeds planted in our field, and (most graphically) the suggestion of eating another human being—all these images converge in the idea of a self-deceiving absorption of the other. Furthermore, the texts all associate the images with the language of scandal, which expresses the antagonisms by which people hinder themselves. Would one be mistaken in thinking that the pathologies of the human spirit might be encompassed in this concept of delusively internalizing the other? However, if that thinking is justified, it would explain the importance of scandal in Jesus' preaching. It would explain the association of scandal with the "things kept secret since the foundation of the world." Scandal would be the original pattern of sin.[22]

The original pattern of sin, rather than the "original sin" simply, because what our reading does *not* yield is the idea of sin as willful offense and disobedience to an autocratic God, and certainly not the idea of a unique sin

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[21] For irony's sake, one might compare Claude Levi-Strauss (386).

[22] Note how scandal stands diametrically opposed to love in 1 John 2:10. Perhaps we also sense the radical importance of scandal for Matthew in the fact that Matthew's calling by Jesus from the tax office is directly followed by the scandal of Jesus' eating with tax-collectors and sinners (Matthew 9:9-13).

resulting in punishment biologically transmitted through the human race. This at least is how original sin is popularly understood. The connection to the story of Adam and Eve is rather that of scandal, which the Serpent personifies. The Serpent initiates scandal in Genesis by getting human beings to feel their own inadequacy, and to attribute the problem to the Creator whom they see as both rival and tyrant, threatened by their desire for wisdom. The Serpent's stratagem succeeds. He arouses in human beings desire for a wisdom that affronts this unfit God, and then they try to play the God's part. Just as the Serpent recommended, they take themselves as standards of good and bad.[23] But these would-be gods run into the obstacle constituted by their conflicting claims. These self-certain judges find themselves in conflict; yet they are unable to remove the block of presumption on which they equally stumble. Sin is not a matter of *human* genetics. With respect to sin, we are the *viper's* brood.

But the very revelation of scandal makes it possible for human beings to find their way out of this process. And that clarifies the positive signification of the original Garden. For the obstacle that scandal creates is, more than anything, an obstacle to individuals' own growth. Jesus frequently refers to the naturalness of plant growth as an illustration of his teachings; and shows particular concern for children who cannot direct and protect their own development. Indeed, the idea of liberating spiritual growth comes up regarding our parable of wheat and tares *apart* from its obvious lesson in plant husbandry. For we skipped over two brief parables at the outset that seemed to interrupt the text, coming in between Jesus' public preaching of the parable and his private explanations to the disciples. These brief parables are those of the mustard seed that grows into a great tree and of the little leaven that raises three measures of flour. (Matthew 13:31-33) These figures now seem to have been placed with good purpose, to signal readers about the astonishing growth that the kingdom is, the growth that comes with the clearing away of the soul's embedded obstructions. The kingdom is a metaphorical return to the Garden where spirit might flourish.[24]

But let us return to Jesus' private discourse on the parable to see how such a spiritual mutation, such a liberation for development is described. We may pick up this thread by noticing a particular snag in the text. It occurs in the part that follows Jesus' "official explanation," in the third image of the

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[23] See Genesis 3:15, and Romans 14:13, where the act of judging the other is the first degree of scandal. On human beings becoming gods to one another, see Girard 1965 (53-65).

[24] Again, see John 20:15.

kingdom, after the images of the man finding treasure in a field and the merchant finding his pearl of great price. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, which when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels but threw the bad away."(47-48) The snag here, what looks like bad composition, is that the text says "they" sift through the catch, grammatically as if it had already told us who "they" are. But it did not. ...Or did it? Might "they" who sift the catch not be the merchant who has found the precious pearl and the man who discovered hidden treasure? Have the man and the merchant been transformed into the fishermen?

What makes it plausible that the lucky man and the merchant have been transformed into the fishermen, is the very transforming power of their discoveries. The two fortune-finders are alike in this respect. The man sells all that he has in order to buy the field with the hidden treasure, and the merchant sells all to buy the special pearl. Their transactions exceed ordinary economic exchanges: they are neither entering into a bargain nor buying on a budget. Their big discoveries come as a surprise, and the key is in their hands before they sell all. The image is of a find that unexpectedly changes everything, changes the worth of all other possessions in view of it. One might reasonably say that their discovery represents a re-valuation of values, a radical shift in understanding good and evil like the one the revelation of scandal implies, and that their discovery concerns the reclaiming of the soul. For the first man buys a *field*—as we saw, an image of the microcosm in the original story. The second man's pearl of great price moves the symbolism of fortune-finding toward the sea, and toward the dragnet-combing of its depths, the final figure of analytic introspection. Jesus would make of his disciples fishers of their own souls.

Re-reading this sequence as a re-valuation of values, a revolution of heart and mind in the light of new insight about evil, helps explain Jesus' second description of the Last Judgment. He says in connection to the sifters at the shore: "So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate [the evil] from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."(49-50) Clearly this parallels the first account of Apocalypse he gave the disciples; the angels come forth and so on. But does Jesus repeat this point for style, a final touch of *gravitas*? Or is his repetition a subtle *reformulation*? Jesus might be offering a reformulation, a second and different picture of Judgment at this point because he is describing a mutation in individuals' power of judgment, a mutation possible if they take his hint about scandal. Remember in the first version of the Last Judgment

Jesus divided the evils into: scandals and lawbreakers. But in this second version that duality is gone. Scandals and lawbreaking have been replaced simply by the word about evil. Jesus' reformulation of the Last Judgment may represent an enlightened process of judgment that he no longer needs to qualify.

In another way, too, the text implies that this new process of judgment takes place *in* human beings, that it is one with their awareness and sorting out of their muddle of good and evil. Notice that the second image of Judgment, the fishing for and sorting of the contents of the sea, clarifies the human activity in a way that the original parable of the Wheat and Tares never did. The original parable never declared what the services of the servants were, but only that they could not weed the field. One might have wondered why these servants weren't given the work of reaping in the harvest to come. The second image of Judgment, by contrast, is an elaborate job-description. The fishers cast the net which gathers the many kinds, draw it to shore when it is full, sit down and sort out the good into vessels. These workers simply *are* reapers, reapers of the sea from start to finish. And, whereas the explanation of the parable of the Wheat and Tares failed to assign the servants an apocalyptic function, the text of the sea-harvest compares the fishers *directly* to angels separating out the evil at the end of time. Their work is likened to the angels' luminous discernment. Only now, if we think of the dragnet as dredging the aqueous depths of a soul, we may understand differently the "wailing and gnashing of teeth" that accompany this angelic work. Might that not be the fishers' *own* anguish and tears as they judge themselves in the light of the kingdom?[25]

If it is right that Jesus' private discourse on his parable is not just a collage of aphorisms, if he is even instructing readers there to look for connections among his remarks, then it indeed might describe a course of initiation into the kingdom. It might even be the disclosure of "things hidden" promised by Matthew, hidden things that turn out to include the scandal in the reader's soul. On this view, all the images of the kingdom—the discoveries of treasures, the labor of the dragnet, the mustard seed and, of course, the wheat and the tares—all fit together in the Evangelist's picture of wisdom. They fit together

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[25] See Dostoevsky (321), and Dostoevsky's source (mentioned in the novel), *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, Homily 1 (34), Homily 6 (59-60).

in his picture of a soul's emancipation from scandal, emancipation for untrammeled growth. They are a description of personal Apocalypse.[26]

So it seems fitting that, as Matthew concludes this text, he alludes to his own initiation into the kingdom. For he refers to "scribes" who, with the help of divine teaching, achieve new fruitfulness, a power of producing and sharing their abundance. Here is his conclusion again:

> Jesus said to them, "Have you discerned all these things?" They said to him, "Yes, Lord." Then he said to them, "Therefore every scribe instructed (*grammateus matheteutheis*) concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house who puts forth out of his treasure things new and old."(13:51-52)[27]

One might well guess that one of the instructed scribes is the Evangelist. But further, the words in Greek, *grammateus matheteutheis*, would be an extended pun on Matthew's name, *Matthaios.* Perhaps an intimate signature on a page of secrets.[28]

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[26] Hence, although our reading of scandal in this parable-text is grounded in Girardian theory, apocalypse does not completely reduce to violent crisis. Apocalypse includes the interior dimension which Northrop Frye described in *The Great Code* (136-137).

[27] See also McCracken's interesting suggestion that the things "old" *are* the "things hidden since the foundation of the world" (100).

[28] I wish to thank Daryl Koehn, Alexandra Mudd, Neil Ribe, and Maryanne Hoeffner for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

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THE FOUNDING MURDER
IN MACHIAVELLI'S *THE PRINCE*

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> One of the doctors of Italy, Nicholas Machiavel, had the confidence
> to put in writing, almost in plain terms, "That the Christian faith
> had given up good men in prey to those who are tyrannical and
> unjust."
>
> (Francis Bacon)

> A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian
> of the Cross calls the thing what it actually is.
>
> (Martin Luther)

René Girard has written eloquently of the founding murder described by Friedrich Nietzsche in aphorism 125 from *The Gay Science* (Girard 1988). In aphorism 125, Nietzsche reflects on the modern prophecy that "God is dead." The crowd, who surrounds the Madman in this aphorism, assumes that God has died of natural causes. As Girard says: "Nietzsche is taken to be the great prophet of the natural death of God" (Girard 1988, 232). The belief in God remains in modernity as a vestige of that senility to which God succumbed a long time ago. Unlike the crowd, the Madman cannot keep from hysterical outbursts about the unnatural death of God. "We have killed Him—you and I! All of us are his murderers!" According to Girard, the Madman's ravings are clues to an original collective murder that human culture

has been unable to repress despite its artistic and philosophic endeavors to the contrary. In fact, this founding violence is the foundation of culture itself.

It is surprising that Girard has written little about another modern prophet, Niccolo Machiavelli. A comparison and contrast of Girard's thought with Machiavelli's sheds an interesting light on both of them. If Nietzsche is *the* modern prophet (however misunderstood) of the unnatural death of God, Machiavelli is *the* modern prophet concerning the unnatural death of human beings. A recent translator of Machiavelli's *The Prince* argues that the heart of his teaching can be summed up in the simple adage: "you can get away with murder."[1] One might summarize Girard's thought in a similar manner: "You cannot get away with murder."

In order to better understand the role of the founding murder in modern thought it is useful to turn to the thought of Niccolo Machiavelli. According to the political philosopher, Leo Strauss, the modernity that culminated in the work of Nietzsche was born in the work of Machiavelli.[2] Strauss describes Machiavelli as the founder of modernity. For Machiavelli all foundings entail violence. No enduring society can come into being without the equivalent of Romulus' murder of his brother Remus. Political order is established by a crime that necessarily transcends the boundaries of that order because it creates that very order. Morality is founded by immorality.

Girard articulates the founding violence as a cultural rather than a political phenomenon. Machiavelli's political foundings presuppose Girard's cultural founding. In Girard's view of the founding murder, the original chaos or Hobbesian war of all-against-all is replaced by the sacrificial order of all-against-one. Consider Gil Bailie's description of the founding murder:

> Primitive religion is born at this moment, the moment when, as Girard puts it, "the atmosphere of terror and hallucination that accompanies the primordial religious experience" reaches its climax, and "the detente that follows only heightens the mystery of the whole process." In the beginning was the hush. Human culture as such begins with

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[1] See Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.'s translation of Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince* (vii). All quotations in the present essay cite both the chapter from *The Prince* and the page number from Mansfield's translation. Quotations from Machiavelli's *Discourses* are from Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov's translation, *Niccolo Machiavelli: Discourses on Livy*.

[2] See Leo Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity" in Hilail Gildin, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*. The three waves are Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Nietzsche.

> the community of victimizers looking at the corpse of its
> victim in solemn astonishment at the miracle of camaraderie
> that has just taken place. Whereas but a moment before strife
> had prevailed, now there is a unanimous religious awe focused
> on the corpse of the victim. (22)

This original sacrifice is not a rational decision or social contract. It is an unconscious mechanism. "There is no such thing as conscious scapegoating. Conscious scapegoating is a modern parody of this scapegoating which is of the order of propaganda, because it implies prior representation" (Girard 1996, 2).

According to the school of Girard, ancient culture hid the brutal truth of the founding violence from itself. The violent origins of culture were unconsciously covered up in an elaborate system of myths.

> The root of the Greek word for myth, *muthos*, is *mu*,
> which means "to close" or "keep secret." *Muo* means to close
> one's eyes or mouth, to mute the voice, or to remain mute.
> Myth remembers discretely and selectively. (Bailie 33)

Only in the Gospel texts do we encounter a revelation that demythologizes human violence. "The first definition of the unconscious in human history" is given in Christ's forgiveness of the crowd at his crucifixion: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34) (See Girard 1986, 33).

While violence is always unconscious to some degree, the original violence might more accurately be described as "pre-conscious." It is the first step toward consciousness (Girard 1987, 100).

> The death of the victim restores calm to the group and
> instaurates for the first time an order of before/after (the
> violence) and inside/outside (the group), the victim being the
> outside on and against which the group as an inside, a
> community, is founded. In sum, it is the order of space and
> time. All subsequent cultural differentiations . . . derive from
> this inaugural expulsion. (McKenna 32)

The founding murder is the moment of hominization, the moment when distinctions slowly begin to emerge, specifically the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence.

There is some evidence that at least one thinker in antiquity glimpsed the truth about human violence. Plato mentions the necessity of using the medicinal "noble lie" or *pharmakon* to cover up the unnatural and violent foundations of civil society (compare *Republic* 382d and 389b with 414b-c). To insure their civic loyalty, the guardians of Plato's ideal regime (or any stable regime) must be raised on the myth of the earth-born citizens. According to this myth, the guardians of a regime are taught that the earth is their mother (414e). The purpose of this myth is to instill a natural legitimacy to a regime that conceals its illegitimate origins. All regimes are founded through the conquest of property which necessitates war (373d). Speaking openly about the violent foundations of political society weakens the moral bonds of society and could thus be considered an immoral act. The *pharmakon* is also necessary because of the unconscious nature of human violence (and its corresponding inability to be persuaded by reason). Plato speaks at length about the bestial, savage, and incestuous desires that manifest themselves during our dreams (*Republic* 571c ff.).[3]

Unlike the ancients, Machiavelli does not hide the violent origins of social order. His approach in *The Prince* is neither elitist nor discreet. In fact he almost advertises those origins. He might be considered the founder of modernity to the extent that he replaces ancient myth with modern propaganda. *The Prince* proclaims openly what the ancients discussed discretely, and then only in the voices of disreputable characters like Thrasymachus (cf. Plato's *Republic*) or Callicles (cf. Plato's *Gorgias*). *The Prince* is addressed to a public figure, a Renaissance prince, Lorenzo de' Medici (1492-1519), the grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449-1492). This manual for public figures has become a popular companion for politicians ever since it was written. Unlike the lengthy *Discourses*, the brevity and terse style of *The Prince* is meant to accommodate the busy life of the *bios politikos*.

I. Conflicts of Interpretation

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[3] Simone Weil argues that Plato understood the unconscious nature of violence. She quotes Plato's *Republic* (366c): "Whoever has a sufficiently certain understanding that justice is the greatest good, will be full of forgiveness for unjust men, he will not be angry with them, knowing that . . . none is just by his own means." Her commentary on this passage is reminiscent of Girard's statement about the unconscious: "There is in these lines something resembling an echo of the words: 'Forgive them for they know not what they do.'" (Weil 140).

Ironically, despite his openness, the conflicting interpretations of *The Prince* are prolific. Modern scholarship has attempted to whitewash the brutality of Machiavelli's teaching by portraying him as a political satirist, an anguished humanist, an impassioned patriot, a morally neutral social scientist, even a sincere Catholic. Like ancient mythology, this modern criticism tends to remember Machiavelli "discretely and selectively." The traditional view of Machiavelli assumes that he is a teacher of evil.[4] There is justification for these conflicts of interpretation. The literary character of *The Prince* lends itself to misinterpretation.

The Prince can be divided into three parts. Few books combine a more boring beginning with a more shocking middle and end. The first part (chs. 1-11), especially chapter one, resembles a scholastic treatise. States are divided into republics and principalities (monarchies); principalities into hereditary and new; new principalities into those that are altogether new and those that are grafted onto an existing hereditary state. Conquered states are divided into those in the habit of being ruled by a prince and those with a republican tradition. The method of conquest is divided into using the arms of others (e.g., mercenaries or auxiliaries) or using one's own arms (e.g., native militia); and is further divided into conquest by fortune and conquest by virtue (*virtu*). The first part of *The Prince* brings to mind the old scholastic adage: "Never deny, seldom affirm, always distinguish."

The second part (chs. 12-23) resembles the popular literary genre of the times known as the "mirror for princes." True to its genre, these central chapters give princes advice on how to treat their enemies (chs. 12-14) and how to treat their friends and subjects (chs. 15-23). George Sabine goes so far as to assert that Machiavelli's writings "belong less to political theory than to the class of diplomatic literature" popular at the time" (338-39).

The third part (chs. 24-26) resembles a patriotic tract, providing a review of Italy's political misfortunes and a corresponding call to arms. The book ends in an unphilosophical manner with several lines from an Italian patriotic poem. Quoting Petrarch, Machiavelli concludes:

> Virtue will take up arms against fury,
> and make the battle short,
> because the ancient valor in Italian hearts

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[4] See Isaiah Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli" for an extensive review of the secondary literature on Machiavelli. Leo Strauss follows the traditional view of Machiavelli. See his *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (9).

is not dead. (ch. 26 [105])

There is no dearth of evidence that Machiavelli's greatest concern in *The Prince* is the liberation of Italy from the barbarians (the French, the Spanish, and the Germans).

However, this tripartite structure of *The Prince* is not absolute, i.e. philosophical distinctions, diplomatic advice, and patriotic fervor appear in all three parts. It is difficult to read *The Prince* without sensing that its advice is intended for princes in general, not just Italian princes. Like a scholastic treatise, particulars are discussed in order to shed light on universals. Machiavelli is often portrayed as the precursor of modern social science. This judgement is based on his articulation of that staple of modern social science, the fact-value distinction.

> Many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity (ch. 15 [61]).

Machiavelli is not concerned with how political life *ought* to be arranged, but how it actually *is* arranged. He can speak openly of cruelty, deceit, and murder without making negative value judgments because these are political matters of fact.

Once again, while there is evidence for this interpretation, it is difficult to describe a book filled with as much passion as *The Prince* as value free. The question of whether Machiavelli actually considers violence as something good (as opposed to value-free) is hotly debated. According to Isaiah Berlin, Machiavelli never attempts to justify violence in terms of common morality (i.e., Christian morality). Nor does he attempt to justify immoral means by appealing to moral ends. For Machiavelli, there are simply two incompatible ends or ideals in life: the manly, heroic morality of the pagan world (especially the Roman Republic) and the humble, common morality of Christianity. He makes no apologies for the pagan virtues he admires. It is his philosophical

descendants like Hobbes, Hegel, and Marx, who try to "justify" political violence from the standpoint of common morality (Berlin 63).

Similarly, Jacques Maritain, while far from condoning his philosophy, defends Machiavelli's integrity by arguing that Machiavelli "never calls evil good or good evil." Machiavelli simply denies the applicability of moral values to the political realm. It is Machiavelli's political disciples like Richelieu and Talleyrand who try to "justify" and baptize violence (Maritain 7,9).

I see their point, but think that the critics protest too much. Machiavelli clearly says that "if all men were good, this teaching [*The Prince*] would not be good" (ch. 18 [69]). But "because they are wicked" (ch. 18 [69]), he concludes that the prince is under no obligation to be otherwise. In other words, if men are good, then goodness is good. But since men are evil (a fairly clear value judgment), then good (e.g. honesty) is evil and evil (e.g. telling lies) is good. Machiavelli is the master of the hypothetical imperative.

II. Interpretations of Conflict

Unlike Girard, Machiavelli does not seem concerned about the genesis of violence. He takes the violence of the world for granted and focuses on the political efficacy of that violence. He does not describe founding murders as unconscious collective actions, but as the conscious acts of solitary princes. A constant theme of *The Prince* is the discussion of the "good foundations" (ch. 12 [48]) of states which assumes violent foundations (ch. 8 [34-38]). Machiavelli's murders are based on the pragmatic calculation of the Caiaphas principle—better that one man die than that an entire group suffer (John 11:49-50). This is a far cry from Girard's founding violence that results from the unconscious imitation (mimesis) of our ancestors, the primates (Girard 1987, 94-99). Girard's founding murder is an unconscious act of violence that is caused by unconscious imitation. Machiavelli's founding murders are conscious acts of violence that are caused by conscious acts of imitation.

In spite of these fundamental differences, Machiavelli's description of founding murders is uncannily similar to Girard's. The model for Machiavelli's perfect prince is Pope Alexander VI's bastard son, Cesare Borgia. Machiavelli alerts the reader that one of Cesare Borgia's founding murders is particularly "deserving of notice and of being imitated by others" (ch. 7 [29]).

Borgia's acquisition of the papal state of Romagna was partly due to fortune (his father was Pope) and partly due to virtue (his *virtu*). Note Machiavelli's reinterpretation of the notion of virtue. Virtue is no longer the

proper cultivation of nature's gifts (cf. Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*). Virtue is raw masculine power that admits no debt to Mother Nature.

> If fortune is feminine, virtue (a term with which Niccolo and other writers often pair fortune) is the essence of masculinity. Apart from its Latin derivation from vir, or man, and its association with all manly qualities—reason, prudence, military skill, and courage—one of its meanings is manly sexual potency or prowess. (de Grazia 212)

Typically Machiavelli gives a positive spin to Borgia and emphasizes the role of virtue in his acquisition of Romagna.

Romagna had been ruled by corrupt lords who despoiled their subjects and created an atmosphere of anarchy and reciprocal violence. To create order out of this political chaos, Borgia put the cruel Remirro de Orco in charge of Romagna. Remirro's violence not only established order, but also threatened disorder by breeding resentment among the people. Borgia had to manage this resentment with still another founding.[5] To establish his own more benevolent reign on top of Remirro's reign of terror, Borgia had Remirro murdered.

> He [Borgia] wished to show that if any cruelty had been committed, this had not come from him but from the harsh nature of his minister. And having seized this opportunity, he had him placed one morning in the piazza at Cesena in two pieces, with a piece of wood and a bloody knife beside him. The ferocity of this spectacle left the people at once satisfied and stupefied (ch. 7 [30].

This victim of political expediency bears the traits of the sacred corpse. The crowd is left pacified and in awe.

Machiavelli uses this same language in describing the virtues of the cruel Roman emperor, Septimius Severus. Founder of the Severan Dynasty, Severus (emperor from 193 to 211) was famous for his cruelty which left his soldiers "astonished and stupefied" and his subjects "reverent and satisfied" (ch. 19 [78]). Here the religious implications of violence are made more explicit. While states can be maintained by relatively benevolent princes like

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[5] Girard would argue that this need for yet another founding is evidence of the fact that the sacrificial system is breaking down in modernity.

Marcus Aurelius (emperor from 161-180), states cannot be founded except by princes of exceptional cruelty. The wise prince "should take from Severus those parts which are necessary to found his state and from Marcus those which are fitting and glorious to conserve a state that is already established and firm" (ch. 19 [82]). Machiavelli gives a similar description of Hannibal whose "inhuman cruelty, which together with his infinite virtues, always made him venerable and terrible in the sight of his soldiers" (ch. 17 [67]). This description of Hannibal's cruelty as "inhuman" accurately depicts the intimate relationship of violence and religion in Machiavelli. Hannibal inspires an almost "divine" terror in his soldiers, placing him closer to the realm of divinity than to humanity. Finally, Machiavelli refers to King Ferdinand of Spain's expulsion of the Marranos as an act of "pious cruelty" (ch. 21 [88]). Machiavelli's use of what to our eyes is a somewhat contradictory phrase, "pious cruelty," is interesting. Piety is a founding virtue of the Roman Republic (think of Virgil's "pius Aeneas") which Machiavelli emulates. Cruelty enunciates a value judgment which would be unavailable as such within the Roman system of values; it is inspired by Christian revelation which Machiavelli seeks to ignore.

The religious nature of violence is not an apology for unlimited violence. On the contrary, as in the sacrificial system, Machiavelli's use of cruelty is strictly limited. He does not condone violence as an end in itself, but as a means for creating civil peace. Sacrificial politics is a technique for economizing violence. He distinguishes between legitimate violence and illegitimate violence, or as he says, cruelties well used and those badly used.

> Those can be called well used (if it is permissible to speak well of evil) that are done at a stroke, out of necessity to secure oneself, and then are not persisted in but are turned to as much utility for the subjects as one can. Those cruelties are badly used which, though few in the beginning, rather grow with time than are eliminated. . . . For injuries must be done altogether, so that, being tasted less, they offend less; and benefits should be done little by little so that they may be tasted better (ch. 8 [37-38]).

Machiavelli's judicious use of cruelty promises the best that a prince and his subjects can hope for in a hopelessly violent world. His notion of virtue (*virtu*) applies a strange twist to Aristotle's ethical ideal of the golden mean. Virtuous

cruelty becomes a mean between excessive cruelty and insufficient cruelty (Owen 1224).

III. Imitation and Political Education

It is also interesting to compare Machiavelli's pedagogic use of imitation with Girard's theory of mimetic desire. If mimetic desire has been unleashed in modernity in a way that would have caused the ancients to shudder, one might give some credit to Machiavelli. In several passages in *The Prince*, Machiavelli advocates the role of imitation in the education of princes.

In chapter six ("Of New Principalities That Are Acquired through One's Own Arms and Virtue") the reader is urged to imitate the "paths beaten by great men," specifically four excellent princes: Moses the liberator of the Hebrews from Egypt and the founder of Israel; Romulus, the founder of Rome; Cyrus, the liberator of the Persians from the Medes; and Theseus, the founder of Athens (ch. 6 [22]). Chapter seven ("Of New Principalities That Are Acquired by Others' Arms and Fortune") is devoted to the imitation of Cesare Borgia. Machiavelli proclaims that "I shall never hesitate to cite Cesare Borgia and his actions" (ch. 13 [55]) which he does with frequency (cf. ch. 7 [26-33], ch. 11 [46], ch. 17 [65], and ch. 20 [86-87]). One contradiction in this imitation of great men is that "when imitating great men, one follows the beaten track and thus does not truly imitate their innovation" (Mansfield 297). Presumably what separates great men from others is precisely that they are not like other men; they create new horizons.

The roles of imitation and violence in the education of the potential prince come together in chapter fourteen ("What a Prince Should Do Regarding the Military"). Here Machiavelli counsels that "a prince should have no other object, nor any other thought, nor take anything else as his art but the art of war and its orders and discipline" (ch. 14 [58]). With the art of war in mind, Machiavelli counsels that the prince be educated in two modes, the mode of deeds and the mode of mind (ch. 14 [59]). These two modes translate into the practice of hunting and the study of history. Hunting accustoms the body to hardship and teaches military strategy amidst the variety of natural terrain. History teaches the imitation of great men. Machiavelli here cites great men who have imitated other great men. "Alexander the Great imitated Achilles; Caesar, Alexander; Scipio, Cyrus" (ch. 14 [60]). Elsewhere, Machiavelli laments the fact that modern men read ancient histories for pleasure rather than to find serious models for imitation *(Discourses* I, preface).

The intimate relationship of hunting and history is elaborated a few chapters later where Machiavelli counsels the reader to imitate wild animals,

specifically the fox and the lion: the fox for its cunning and the lion for its ferocity. In a passage reminiscent of the famous passage on the fact/value distinction (where Machiavelli states that the prince must learn not to be good as well as to be good), he states:

> Therefore it is necessary for a prince to know well how to use the beast and the man. This role was taught covertly to princes by ancient writers, who wrote that Achilles, and many other ancient princes, were given to Chiron the centaur to be raised, so that he would look after them with his discipline. To have as teacher a half-beast, half-man means nothing other than that a prince needs to know how to use both natures; and the one without the other is not lasting. (ch. 18 [69])

Later in the text, Machiavelli states that the cruel Roman emperor, Severus, was particularly adept at imitating the natures of the fox and of the lion (ch. 19 [78]).

The comparison of the passage from chapter eighteen with the thought of Girard is particularly illuminating. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard argues that the denial of God does not "eliminate transcendency," but diverts it to the human realm. "The imitation of Christ becomes the imitation of one's neighbor" (59). Machiavelli takes this logic one step further. The denial of God diverts human longing to the animal realm. If one does not imitate God, one imitates the beasts. Leo Strauss makes the following comments on Machiavelli's passage from chapter eighteen regarding the half-beast/half-man:

> The imitation of the beast takes the place of the imitation of God. . . . Since man . . . is the being that must try to transcend humanity, he must transcend humanity in the direction of the subhuman if he does not transcend it in the direction of the superhuman. . . . Machiavelli . . . replaces the imitation of the God-Man Christ by the imitation of the Beast-Man Chiron. (1984, 9)

The death of God does not result in something as benign as liberal humanism. Machiavelli's emphasis on the imitation of beasts makes this clear.

IV. Violence and Nature

I conclude with two reflections on *The Prince*, the first regarding Machiavelli's violent view of nature and the second, his violent view of politics. In *The Prince* Machiavelli subtly ignores a discussion of nature in favor of a discussion of fortune (*fortuna*). For Machiavelli, nature becomes fortune, something to be conquered. His metaphors for fortune are telling. In chapter twenty-five he describes fortune as a "violent river" that can only be controlled by the "dikes and dams" of human ingenuity (ch. 25 [98]). Later in the same chapter he describes fortune as a woman: "Fortune is a woman; and it is necessary, if one wants to hold her down, to beat her and strike her down" (ch. 25 [101]). His attitude toward nature takes a revolutionary shift from the ancient attitude of reverence toward nature to the patriarchal attitude of rape, the conquest of nature. When dealing with fortune, Machiavelli argues that it is "better to be impetuous than cautious" (ch. 25 [101]). Furthermore, "she lets herself be won more by the impetuous than by those who proceed coldly" (ch. 25 [101]). Machiavelli exalts action above cold reason. For Machiavelli, reason is not an end in itself, but a tool of the passions.

If Machiavelli is the founder of modernity, as Strauss contends, we are challenged to question the goodness of the modern project. The dialogue between Machiavelli and Girard becomes to some extent a dialogue between Strauss and Girard. For Strauss, modernity undermines the foundations of morality. The teleological view of nature in ancient science (e.g., Aristotle's notion of final causality, the heavenly spheres, etc.) supported a moral hierarchy—virtue in the ancient soul and in the ancient *polis*. In modernity this hierarchical cosmos is replaced by a chaotic nature viewed as "raw material" (Heidegger) at the disposal of human freedom. To quote Strauss:

> Conquest of nature implies that nature is the enemy, a chaos to
> be reduced to order; everything good is due to man's labor
> rather than to nature's gift: nature supplies only the almost
> worthless materials. (1989, 88)

For Strauss, Machiavelli is the modern founder of this desacralized view of nature. In Machiavelli's writings, there is no mention of natural law or natural justice. There is no cosmic support for morality.

The homogeneous and non-teleological view of nature in modern natural science produces a crisis in moral distinctions. Once fact and value are radically separated, nature is no longer a guide to human action. Leo Strauss observes at the end of his commentary on Machiavelli: "Modern man as little

as pre-modern man can escape imitating nature as he understands nature" (1984, 298). Our attitude towards non-human nature effects our attitude towards human nature.

Strauss"s concern is with the ethical nihilism that results from the fact/value distinction. If nature is worthless raw material, what about human nature? Why treat human nature less violently than non-human nature? If we accept the distinction between facts and values, and understand values as the interpretations our wills impose upon facts, why allow human-made values like equality or compassion stand in the way of progress? Abortion and euthanasia are two obvious examples of the moral crisis that is engendered by the modern inability to make value judgements. How can a value-free science distinguish between abortion as a cruelty well used or a cruelty badly used?

Girard's focus is more on the cognitive nihilism (post-structuralism, deconstructionism) that eschews the possibility of any positive knowledge. What Strauss terms the crisis of modernity, Girard considers part of a broader sacrificial crisis. "The rise of science and technology is clearly linked to the desacralization of nature in a universe in which the victimage mechanisms function less and less well" (1987, 136). However, Girard's diagnosis of the crisis of modernity and his remedy are quite different from Strauss's.

Girard's view of antiquity is not nearly so sanguine as Strauss's. Girard maintains that the orderly hierarchy of the ancient world was founded on the victimage mechanism. For Girard, modernity results not from a novel and violent attitude toward nature that begins with Machiavelli, but from the demythologizing effect that the Gospels have on archaic religious culture. Modern science is not a destroyer of morality, but a result of the spirit of the Gospels.

> The invention of science is not the reason that there are no longer witch-hunts, but the fact that there are no longer witch-hunts is the reason that science has been invented. The scientific spirit, like the spirit of enterprise in an economy, is a by-product of the profound action of the Gospel text. (1986, 204-205)

While the classical foundation for morality (i.e. natural law) may have been undermined by the modern attack on ancient politics and ancient science, the biblical foundation for morality remains. Modern science cannot undermine the biblical foundation of morality because it shares the same foundation.

This is not to say that modernity is unequivocally good. Modern science does make possible the apocalyptic violence to which the Bible testifies. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, it would prove fruitful to study the relationship between the cognitive nihilism with which Girard is concerned and the ethical nihilism with which Strauss is concerned.

V. Violence and Politics

Machiavelli's violent attitude towards human nature mirrors his violent attitude towards non-human nature. In defense of Machiavelli, one might argue that he is not a teacher of evil, but merely a teacher of the lesser of two evils. And how (in Machiavelli's logic) can the lesser of two evils be anything but good? In his famous chapter on cruelty and mercy, he begs the reader once again to imitate the example of Cesare Borgia.

> Cesare Borgia was held to be cruel; nonetheless his cruelty
> restored the Romagna, united it, and reduced it to peace and
> faith. If one considers this well, one will see that he was much
> more merciful than the Florentine people, who so as to escape
> a name for cruelty, allowed Pistoia to be destroyed (ch. 17
> [65]).

The appeasement policies toward the Axis Powers in the 1930's are a modern example. Appeasement does not economize violence, but may give violence a larger field in which it holds sway.

For those like Machiavelli who assume that men are evil (*Prince*, ch. 18 [69]; *Discourses* I, 3), it is more just to use force when necessary than to compromise in order to attain an illusory peace. According to Machiavelli, social disorders (reciprocal violence) "harm a whole community, but the executions that come from the prince harm one particular person" (ch. 17 [66]). The judicious use of cruelty results in less cruelty. Modern politics remains the secular heir to the ancient sacrificial system.

Throughout his writings, Machiavelli implies that the sorry state of Renaissance Italy is caused not only by the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church (*Discourses* I, 12) but also by the unmanly virtues that centuries of Christianity had instilled in the European peoples. In making people meek and humble, Christianity has made good people the prey of evil people (*Discourses* II, 2). The active virtues of the ancient Roman Republic have degenerated into the contemplative virtues of modern Christianity. Like the

pagan apologists that Augustine confronted in the *City of God*, Machiavelli blames the fall of Rome on Christianity.

His criticism of Christianity is explicit in a famous passage from *The Prince*: "From this it arises that all armed prophets conquered and the unarmed ones were ruined" (ch. 6 [24]). He makes this statement in reference to Savonarola, whose influence was short-lived, but he does not mention Jesus (nor Paul), whose influence on history is anything but short-lived. For all of his realism, Machiavelli (according to Strauss) cannot account for the victory of Christianity (1984, 84). If we consider his favorite models in *The Prince*, their influence does not compare with that of Jesus. Even within the logic of rationalized violence (the Caiaphas principle), Machiavelli's argument has its weaknesses that Girard's analysis brings to light.

For example, Machiavelli's praise of the Roman emperor, Severus, is puzzling. Severus' cruelty did bring temporary stability to the empire. But the longer lasting effects of his reign are questioned by no less an historian than Edward Gibbon.

> The contemporaries of Severus, in the enjoyment of the peace and glory of his reign, forgave the cruelties by which it had been introduced. Posterity, who experienced the fatal effects of his maxims and example, justly considered him as the principal author of the decline of the Roman empire. (Vol I, ch. 5, 110)

The example of Severus proves that Machiavelli's doctrine may be effective in the short-run, but not necessarily in the long-run. Similarly Cesare Borgia's victories were short-lived. And the Renaissance popes who were Machiavellian in the extreme lost power to an unarmed German monk.[6]

It is ironic to note that the favorite "heroes of this supreme realist [Machiavelli] are all, wholly or in part, mythical"—Moses, Romulus, Cyrus, Theseus.[7] Even for the outspoken Machiavelli, violence tends to become shrouded in myth. Attention to Machiavelli's models reveals the mythical origins of his secular rationality. Machiavelli reads history "discretely and

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[6] The obvious nature of Machiavelli's errors is puzzling. In the *Discourses* III (48), he counsels that "when one sees a great error made by an enemy, one ought to believe that there is a deception underneath." We are left to wonder whether this counsel applies to Machiavelli himself.

[7] Isaiah Berlin, "The Originality of Machiavelli" (62). Machiavelli refers to these four models in ch. 6 [22-24] and ch. 26 [102]. The reference in ch. 26 does not mention Romulus.

selectively," that is, mythically. Like Nietzsche, Machiavelli is forced to resurrect ancient myths in order to rationalize and legitimize violence. As a result of the Judeo-Christian revelation, the burden of proof falls on the shoulders of violence. After Christ, violence requires a justification that it did not require before. As counsel for the defense, Machiavelli resorts to a political justification by appealing to the logic of the Caiaphas principle and the logic of the lesser of two evils. Like Nietzsche, Machiavelli's immoderate rhetoric and glorification of violence betray the weakness of his position, not its strength.

The Machiavellian distinction between fact and value cuts two ways. It can be used to liberate humanity from ancient superstition. It can also be used to legitimize the interests of the ruling class. In the absence of any moral facts, all values become mythical. While Machiavelli desires to be an enlightened pagan, he is forced to resort to myth to found his new regime of modernity. But he cannot have it both ways. Is he the creator of a rational *Realpolitik* or the founder of another myth?

Machiavelli argues that well used cruelty economizes violence. He judges that being impetuous is better than being cautious. He concludes that men are evil. But if values are unconnected to facts, why are his judgements of any more value than their contrary judgements? Girard is more realistic than Machiavelli because he does not arbitrarily divorce fact from value. While Girard can hardly be described as a proponent of the natural law of which Strauss mourns the loss,[8] there is clearly one irreducible moral fact that grounds his Christian ethics—the innocent victim. No effort of myth or propaganda can ultimately cover up the innocence of victims slain "since the foundation of the world." For Girard, you cannot get away with murder. The fact (and value) of the victim's innocence always asserts itself in the long-run.

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[8] Strauss is not an unequivocal proponent of natural law theory. For his understanding of natural law and its distinction from natural right, see his encyclopedia entry, "Natural Law."

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ST. AUGUSTINE'S
NOVELISTIC CONVERSION

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In his famous biography of St. Augustine, Peter Brown attempts to explain what set the *Confessions* "apart from the intellectual tradition to which Augustine belonged" (*Augustine of Hippo* 169). While he concedes that "the *Confessions* are a masterpiece of strictly intellectual autobiography" (167), he concludes that it is more important to realize that they "are, quite succinctly, the story of Augustine's 'heart,' or of his 'feelings'—his *affectus"*(169). He continues to explain that "in the *Confessions*, however, the evocation of Augustine's feelings forms part of the wider study of the evolution of his will" (172). Thus, Brown suggests that Augustine's central anthropological concern is to determine the *origin* and/or *causes* of human desire (i.e. the "evolution of will"). Augustine's "exhaustive analysis of his motives" (as Brown describes it) is linked to his lifetime struggle to explain the complex interaction between his free will and a divine will (grace) to transform his "sinful" desires and create a "new heart" within him. In Brown's view, the *Confessions* reflect Augustine's struggle to discover whether desire originates in God or man.

We can agree with Brown that this theological agenda is important to Augustine, for it will resurface in all of his theological struggles stretching from his pre-Christian engagement with the Manichees to his final battle with Pelagius. Nevertheless, I will argue in this paper that the *Confessions* reflect another important dimension to Augustine's morphology of desire. Regardless

of its divine or human source, Augustine's desires often begin with the imitation of another person. In portraying examples of his life up to and including his famous conversion in the year 386 (Book VIII), Augustine consistently shows that his desires have been copies or imitations of various models whom he has chosen to follow. Writers such as Brown have considered the importance of desire (or the will) in the *Confessions*, and critics like Geoffrey Harpham (whom we will address later) have examined Augustine's interest in mimesis during various scenes in the book. Yet, with the exception of Avitol Wohlman, no one (to my knowledge) has adequately considered the combination of the two: mimetic desire.

In the first book of the *Confessions*, Augustine recounts his childhood, and, by the eighth chapter, he has already introduced a theme which will haunt the entire work: the link between desire and language.

> My desires were internal; adults were external to me and had
> no means of entering into my soul. So I threw my limbs about
> and uttered sounds, signs resembling my wishes. (I:8)

Language is born as a result of the need to express desire. For Augustine, words, gestures, and all utterances connect the "internal" wants to the "external" object of communication (in this case, adults). In fact, if Augustine links desire with the soul (external adults could not "enter his soul"), then language becomes the bridge between souls: it communicates desire from soul to soul.

When Augustine reaches boyhood, and he begins to learn the accepted modes of articulation, the link between language and desire remains: "By groans and various sounds and various movements of parts of my body I would endeavor to express the intentions of my heart to persuade people to bow to my will" (I:13). Language communicates desire, but it also seeks to transform and generate desire. Beyond simply explaining his wishes, Augustine's language is persuasive, seeking to get others to "bow to my will."

Whereas some people would like to remember their childhood as a time of innocence, joy, and peace, Augustine depicts his early life as "sinful," unhappy, and fraught with tears and conflicting interests.

> For an infant of that age, could it be reckoned good to use tears
> in trying to obtain what it would have been harmful to get? ...
> The feebleness of infant limbs is innocent, not the infant's
> mind. (I:11)

Although he does not remember his own infancy, Augustine extrapolates from his analysis of other children.

> I have personally watched and studied a jealous baby. He could not yet speak and, pale with jealousy and bitterness, glared at his brother sharing his mother's milk. Who is unaware of this fact of experience?

Envy among infants is universal: "who is unaware of this fact?"

> Mothers and nurses claim to charm it away by their own private remedies. But it can hardly be innocence, when the source of milk is flowing richly and abundantly, not to endure a share going to one's blood-brother, who is in profound need, dependent for life exclusively on that one food.(I:11)

Augustine's childhood analysis reflects the interests of both his recent ascension to the bishopric of Hippo (when he composed *The Confessions*) as well as his own anthropology. We know that Augustine was pressed to explain the Church's faith in infant baptism, for when he writes, *On Free Choice of The Will*, he mentions that "people often wonder what good it does for infants to receive the sacrament of the baptism of Christ" (116).[1] One must assert an inherent sinfulness in humanity —present at birth—to warrant the practice of infant baptism. Augustine's child psychology thus attempts to prove the reality of original sin.

But of what does this fallen nature consist? Why does Augustine insist on describing and explaining in vivid detail the jealousy of a nursing baby? Augustine makes two things clear in his account of the baby. First, the jealous baby has no legitimate reason to desire the milk which his brother drinks, for "it can hardly be innocence, when the source of milk is flowing richly and abundantly." Second, instead of rejoicing that one's "blood-brother" is happy, the jealous baby remains dissatisfied, for he wants what his brother has. Even though the "milk is flowing richly and abundantly," the baby remains unhappy: envious. He does not "endure a share going to one's blood-brother, who is in profound need, dependent for life exclusively on that one food" (see Wohlman 281).

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[1] See pp. 116-117 for his discussion of the sacrament of baptism.

The theme of the jealous baby resurfaces in many different situations, as Augustine recounts his journey through life. The first telling example of this phenomenon occurs in Augustine's school. In recalling his love of schoolyard games, he reflects on the ironic beating he would receive from his teachers for play that took him away from his studies.

> The schoolmaster who caned me was behaving no better than I when, after being refuted by a fellow-teacher in some pedantic question, he was more tormented by jealousy and envy than I when my opponent overcame me in a ball-game. (I:15)

The jealous baby has become both a jealous schoolboy and a jealous schoolmaster. In this case, the milk drunk by the "other brother" is the victory of a ball-game or the victory in some "pedantic" intellectual rivalry. In both cases, the milk is a meaningless prestige that evokes envy simply because someone else possesses it.

There is a difference, however, between Augustine's description of the mother's milk and the prestige of winning a schoolyard or intellectual game. Mother's milk is defined as abundant and richly flowing. Prestige of victory, however, can only belong to one person at a time. By definition it cannot be abundant. This difference, however, allows us to see Augustine's anthropology develop in an important new light. The quest for prestige is ultimately a desire to acquire a unique possession at the someone else's expense. Competition itself seems to generate this desire among its combatants: each wants the prestige that the other holds sacred. Envy is the name for the effect of a desire to have what another has, but it is ultimately displaced by a new word that Augustine uses in this passage: pride.

"In competitive games I loved the pride of winning" (I:16). Augustine returns to this word perhaps more often than he uses "envy" throughout his autobiography. In this example, we already see the absurdity of pride. It seeks to win competitions, yet it ultimately seeks nothing but winning: overcoming the rival. The "thrill of victory" is nothing more than stealing prestige from the other brother. Regardless of its fundamental absurdity, this desire for the apparent "being" of the model and rival determines much of the life that Augustine recounts in the *Confessions*.

Further on in Book 1, Augustine recalls his entry into the fiery and competitive schooling of rhetoric, and the prestige of eloquence becomes the next object of his desire.

> When one considers the men proposed to me as models for my
> imitation, it is no wonder that in this way I was swept along by
> vanities and traveled right away from you, my God.(II:16)

Because of the models to whom he was exposed, "it is no wonder" that he
behaved the way that he did. We are dealing with a pattern here.

Augustine has already shown us how a little baby takes his blood-brother
as a model for his desires, how a young schoolboy takes his schoolmates as
models, and how a schoolmaster takes his peers as models. It should not
surprise us that a growing youth takes his fellow orators as models and
imitates their desire to perform and succeed in rhetoric. The Western tradition
remains indebted to St. Augustine's magnificent rhetorical skills, as they
resonate throughout his masterpieces. Yet, while we admire his talent for
speech and writing, he himself confesses that much of his desire to excel in
rhetoric was copied from others' desires.

Book II extends the exploration of imitation and desire into the realm of
sexuality. Augustine recalls his "past foulnesses and carnal corruptions not
because I love them but so that I may love you, my God. It is from love of
your love that I make my act of recollection" (II:1). He was not seeking the
love of God at this point in his life, for he had fallen in love with the pleasures
of sexual relations. Yet, can we say that this phase of Augustine's life is linked
to our developing understanding of Augustine's anthropology? Does he
believe that his burgeoning sexual urges are imitative? He admits that these
urges have arrived with his entrance into puberty: are not these sexual
impulses natural, generated from within, rather than defined according to a
model?

Augustine does not say that sexual desire is evil. Although he does accept
St. Paul's advice that "it is good for a man not to touch a woman" (I Cor 7: 1),
he nevertheless reflects that "If only someone could have imposed restraint on
my disorder . . . then the stormy waves of my youth would have finally broken
on the shore of marriage" (III:3). Augustine is not confessing puberty as his
sin, for he believes that the source of conflict was something else.[2] When we
turn to II:7, all of the themes of imitation, envy, and pride return:

> Among my peer group I was ashamed not to be equally guilty
> of shameful behavior when I heard them boasting of their

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[2] As Wolhman remarks, "It is not because they are carnal but because they are disorderly, that
is, occasions of pride, greed, or anarchy, that the objects of desire make the will bad" (271).

> sexual exploits. Their pride was the more aggressive, the more
> debauched their acts were; they derived pleasure not merely
> from the lust of the act but also from the admiration it evoked.
> ... I went deeper into vice to avoid being despised, and when
> there was no act by admitting to which I could rival my
> depraved companions, I used to pretend I had done things I had
> not done at all, so that my innocence should not lead my
> companions to scorn my lack of courage, and lest my chastity
> be taken as a mask of inferiority. (II:7)

In reality, Augustine seems to suggest very little difference between the
mimesis of sexual desire and that of any other appetite. The same desire for
prestige among the orators now looms among the "peer group" that seeks
sexual exploits. Each peer becomes a model for the other, and sexual prestige
is the new milk for envious brothers.

In the second half of Book 2 Augustine takes us through a long, seemingly
overdrawn, meditation on the evil of stealing pears from a pear tree. Why does
he spend half of a Book on one "sin" that most priests would label "venial?"
Brown argues that no passage in the Confessions better reveals Augustine's
central concern: the explanation of the will (172). Yet, once again, we find that
his deliberations on desire accompany a focus on mimesis, for he did not steal
the pears in solitude: "Yet had I been alone I would not have done it—I
remember my state of mind to be thus at the time—alone I would never have
done it" (II:16). Augustine repeats the question and completes the Book
pondering the mystery. "Why then did I derive pleasure from an act I would
not have done on my own?" (II:17). The message is clear to the reader:
"Therefore my love in that act was to be associated with the gang in whose
company I did it" (II:16). Here, again, he has been following the crowd.

Augustine bombards us with example after example of the effect of
models and imitation on his desires as a growing adolescent and young adult:

> I was already top of the class in the rhetor's school, and was
> pleased with myself for my success and was inflated with
> conceit.(III:16)

Again, his pride is related to the imitation of his peers: "That explains why I
fell in with men proud of their slick talk, very earthly-minded and loquacious."

Pointing to all of his models, Augustine does not deny his own role-
modeling. In fact, if desire is imitated, then desires will be caught and spread

by each member of a group or crowd that is "infected" with a given desire. From Augustine's "19th to my 28th year, our life was one of being seduced and seducing, being deceived and deceiving in a variety of desires" (IV:1).

> We pursued the empty glory of popularity, ambitious for the applause of the audience at the theater when entering for verse competitions to win a garland of mere grass, concerned with the follies of public entertainments and unrestrained lusts. (IV:1)

The autobiography is mutating into a kind of collective biography, for Augustine has no "self" independent from the "others" in his recollection. It is only a "we" that recalls. Given that his desires are defined according to his peers' desires and, reciprocally, theirs by each other, the group is undifferentiated in its interests. Thus, a decade of his life is summed up in the recollection of *all of them* collectively seducing and being-seduced, deceiving and being deceived.

Near the end of the fourth Book, Augustine stirs with an adoration for one of the well-known orators of Rome, referred to as "Hierius," to whom he dedicates one of his books:

> I had never set eyes on him, but I loved the man for his renown as a person of high culture, and because I had heard some words of his quoted which gave me pleasure. But I loved him above all because others thought him delightful; they praised him to the skies.(IV: 21)

Augustine does not like Hierius' work simply for the quality of his oration. Above all, Augustine is drawn to him because others are.

> A man can be praised and loved even though far distant from us. It would be absurd to suppose that this kind of love is transmitted from the mouth of the person praising him to the heart of the person hearing. *But love in one person is infectious in kindling it in another.* Hence it comes about that a person who is praised comes to be loved, when people believe that the praise comes from a sincere heart, that is, when the praise comes from one who loves him. (IV:21; my italics)

Augustine explains the origin of most forms of stardom: the "emperor is wearing clothes" only for those who have caught the desire to believe that this is so. "But love in one person is infectious in kindling it in another." That love is infectious means that desire is infectious. For Augustine, desire is mimetic: "so at that period of my life I used to love people on the basis of human judgment" (IV:22).

Finally, Augustine's love for Hierius generates new desires, for the loved one becomes a new model for him. "But that orator was of the type which I so loved that I wanted to be like him. And I wandered away in conceit and was carried about by every wind." From model to model, Augustine follows the capricious whims of desire, for he is like autumn leaves "carried about by every wind."

Books 5, 6, and 7 relate Augustine's further journeys as a rhetorician and teacher, cataloguing the new models and ideas which he finds along the way. Wohlman argues that Augustine's encounter with Fauste de Milève in Book V and St. Ambrose in Book VI both reflect the *Confessions'* continuing tale of a "wandering not only from doctrine to doctrine but also from teacher to teacher, or, more precisely, from model to model" (279). She appropriately summarizes the import of this autobiographical tale by stating that Augustine's journey to truth is accompanied by "*un besoin d'imiter un modèle*" (280).

When he travels from Carthage to Milan, Augustine gives up his Manicheanism for the neo-Platonist ideas which he discovers in the books there. The discovery of the unity inherent in God (the "one" of the Plotinian system) allows Augustine to break away from his Manichean conceptions of God and the worked he created. Yet, his conversion to neo-Platonism in Book VII is quickly overshadowed by the dramatic "episode in the garden" that signifies Augustine's final conversion to Christianity in Book 8.[3]

At this time in his life Augustine holds his secular activity

> in disgust, and now that I was not burning with my old
> ambitions in hope and honour and money it was burdensome
> to me to tolerate so heavy a servitude. By now those prizes
> gave me no pleasure in comparison with your gentleness and

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[3] Some have argued that Augustine does not really convert "out of" neo-Platonism at this point in his life. Brown, in fact, maintains that "the *Confessions* were patently the work of a neo-Platonist philosopher" (165). He accurately credits the work of R. J. O'Connell, S.J. in uncovering the important links between Plotinus and Augustine (see Brown 168-169). For our purposes, it is necessary at this point only to maintain that Augustine, the writer, signifies his conversion to Christianity in this scene.

> "the beauty of your house which I loved" (Ps. 25:8). But I was
> still firmly tied by woman. (VIII:2)

Augustine remains trapped and ensnared by "the lust of the flesh" which, he
claims, keeps him from a full devotion to the God whom he is learning to
worship. He meets a man named Simplicianus, the priest who baptized
Ambrose, the bishop of Milan and Augustine's mentor. Augustine takes the
opportunity to tell "him [Simplicianus] the story of my wanderings in error"
(VIII:3).

Simplicianus responds by telling Augustine of a man named Victorinus,
who, like Augustine, had been a prominent orator in Rome, and "a tutor to
numerous noble senators" (VIII:3). Victorinus was privately a Christian,
though he refused to quit his pagan practices or speak out against the pagan
rituals, for "he was afraid to offend his friends, proud devil-worshippers"
(VIII:4). Finally, he converts and confesses his faith in front of the crowds.
Simplicianus finishes his tale of Victorinus, and Augustine is suddenly and
deeply affected:

> As soon as your servant Simplicianus told me this story about
> Victorinus, I was ardent to follow his example. He had indeed
> told it to me with this object in view. (VIII:10)

The central Augustinian theme emerges once again, for Victorinus' confession
becomes a new model for Augustine: he now desires to follow the Christian
path.

However, having followed the way of "carnal desire" for so long,
Augustine remained "chained down" and "bound not by an iron imposed by
anyone else but by the iron of my own choice" (VIII:10). At last, though, he
comes to "tell the story . . . of the way in which you [God] delivered me from
the chain of sexual desire, by which I was tightly bound, and from the slavery
of worldly affairs" (VIII:13).

Augustine and Alypius are staying at Nebridius' house when a fateful
visitor, Ponticianus, arrives. "A Christian and a believer," Ponticianus
converses with the two men, and when he learns of their recent interest in
Christian scripture, he begins to describe the life of the Egyptian monk Antony
(VIII:14), the "flocks in the monasteries," and the "fertile deserts of the
wilderness." He also describes other friends who one day randomly picked up
a book about Antony and were inspired to imitate his life. Their stories in
turn fostered Ponticianus' desire to follow the Way.

Anyone who has been carefully reading Augustine's recollection of his susceptibility to imitation will know what is about to happen now:

> This was the story Ponticianus told. But while he was speaking Lord, you turned my attention back to myself. You took me up from behind my own back where I had placed myself because I did not wish to observe myself, and you set me before my face so that I should see how vile I was, how twisted and filthy, covered in sores and ulcers. . . . If I tried to avert my gaze from myself, his story continued relentlessly. . . . But at that moment the more ardent my affection for those young men of whom I was hearing, who for the soul's health had given themselves wholly to you [God] for healing, the more was the detestation and hatred I felt for myself in comparison with them. (VIII:16-17)

The words of the story overpower Augustine and force him to observe his own behavior, for the suggestion of a new model of desire is challenging his current way of life, his current desires. Imitation is now difficult and painful, and he runs out into the garden. "In the agony of hesitation I made many physical gestures of the kind men make when they want to achieve something but lack the strength."

Finally, choosing a celibate life is described in the most powerful vision of mimetic modeling:

> There appeared the dignified and chaste Lady Continence, serene and cheerful without coquetry, enticing me in an honourable manner to come and not to hesitate. To receive and embrace me she stretched out pious hands, filled with numerous good examples for me to follow. There were large numbers of boys and girls, a multitude of all ages, young adults and grave widows and elderly virgins. . . . And she smiled on me with a smile of encouragement as if to say: "are you incapable of doing what these men and women have done?" (VIII:27)

Augustine receives the grace of one further Christian model at this point, as he hears some voice tell him to pick up a book and read ("tolle, lege").[4] He opens his Bible to Romans 13:13-14 and finds what his new model of desire is: "Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts" (VIII:20). Augustine has converted. His new model for desire is the Word made Flesh: Jesus Christ.[5]

Other critics have addressed the mimetic nature of the conversion scene. In an article examining the narrative structure of Book VIII, Robert Jacques sees the link between the story of conversion and its capacity to model desire: "Simplicianus partially succeeds in his goal when recounting the story, for Augustine is seized by the desire *to imitate* Victorinus" (361). In my view this seizure of desire is a major thrust of *The Confessions*.

Like Jacques, Kenneth Burke comments on Alypius' imitation of Augustine "picking up the book and reading": "first, loyal, 'me, too' Alypius tries the same experiment . . . and is as promptly converted" (116). Augustine would appreciate this nickname for his sidekick, but he would stress as well the necessity of being called "me, too." Showing his "me, too" status throughout his life, imitating model after model, Augustine has tried to convey his anthropology of mimetic desire to his readers.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham systematizes *The Confessions* in a similar way. He argues that "formally and thematically, the text centers on the conversion in Book 8, the most famous event in the narrative" (93). Harpham traces the mimesis from Victorinus to Augustine as a "stacking of models."

> This stacking of models continues even beyond this episode,
> driving the entire project of *The Confessions*, which its author
> hopes will stir other hearts, providing a model. . . . Reading,

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[4] Note how the problem of grace and free will is separate from Augustine's depiction of mimetic desire. While we can become aware of our imitation of others, we cannot be sure where we get the power to stop imitating bad models, start imitating good ones, or begin to search for better ones. In other words, one can be late Augustinian, semi-Pelagian, or Pelagian without forfeiting the knowledge of mimetic desire.

[5] This "agony in the garden" perhaps reflects Augustine's attempt to link his conversion with Christ's trial in Gethsemane. In this case, Augustine finally submits to the Christian model of desire, free from strife, rivalry and the snares of the flesh. Similarly, in Gethsemane, Jesus models obedience of his heavenly father's will when he accepts death (if the cup may not pass). The prayer of the Christian is embodied in Jesus' wish that "Father, not my will but thine be done."

we may infer from this sequence of events, stabilizes the
wandering subject by proposing a species of imitation with the
power to convert, to bind the life of the reader into its own
pattern. (96)

Harpham appropriately credits John Freccero with this explanation of the
mimetic dimensions of the conversion:

We can examine the element in the conversion experience that
seems most directly to support the cause of the former, the
elaborately mimetic or, as John Freccero has called it, the
"literary" character of Augustine's decision to commit himself
to Christianity. (96)[6]

Freccero argues that, in the conversion scene, the call to Christian
commitment is passed mimetically from Simplicianus and Victorinus to
Augustine and then from Antony to Ponticianus and friends. In the next link
in the chain, Augustine and Alypius, approach the garden where Augustine
hears the child's voice and then reads St. Paul's exhortation to Christian piety.
This call, a desire embedded in a spoken or written word, transforms
Augustine who then inscribes his conversion in the written text that we read.
The author hopes that the recounting of his newfound desire will inspire his
readers to imitate him. The call to imitate Christ is incarnated in the confession
of each convert whose testimony inspires new conversions. According to
Freccero, this interaction of language and desire parallels—symbolically, at
least—the central Christian mystery of the Incarnation: "The Word Became
Flesh and dwelt among us. . ." (John 1:14).

Harpham expresses a further insight bearing on an aspect of the
conversion which remains to be addressed: Augustine's *discovery* of mimetic
desire:

The significance of the imitative element in conversion is that
Augustine understands himself, awakens to himself, possesses
himself, only as a repetition of other selves.... Situating himself
within the community of imitators, Augustine understands the

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[6] Harphan does not cite any specific work by Freccero. I have taken the liberty of
summarizing some points he made in lectures at Stanford University, Winter, 1994-95, in a class
on Dante's *Inferno*.

> text when he understands that it is a model for himself; and he
> understands himself when he grasps his own "tropological"
> nature, that is, when he sees not only that he can imitate the
> text but that he has in fact been doing so all along. (96, 97)

Harpham suggests that conversion implies a revelation and a discovery of
one's own imitative nature. To some extent, then, he implies that Augustine's
pre-conversion life consists of a blindness to his imitative relationship with
others. He moves from pride to humility in this transformation, for
"conversio, or the imitation of models . . . corrects the 'eremitic' arrogance of
thinking oneself and one's story unique" (56). Pride, then, blinds oneself to
one's imitative nature.

Much of Harpham's work fits with my analysis, and his citation of René
Girard's ideas confirms the close proximity of our arguments:

> In conversion the essence, the true configuration, declares itself
> as such, bringing motion to a halt. This is the sense in which
> René Girard argues that conversion serves as the principle of
> closure in any complex plot: "All novelistic conclusions are
> conversions, it is impossible to doubt this.". . .The conclusive
> conversion is brought about by a reversal, whether in the mind
> of the protagonist or in the structure of events, and a
> recognition that the new configuration was implicit in all prior
> configurations. (102)

The work of René Girard has been the model for my approach to the
Confessions. Girard's comparative analysis of some of the masterpieces of
Western literature has led to a discovery of the common revelation of the
mimetic nature of desire in these texts. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, he
shows that Cervantes, Flaubert, Stendhal, Proust and Dostoevsky understand
the triangular structure of desire: a subject's desire for an object is always
mediated or modeled by another's desire:

> The disciple [or subject, hero, lover, etc.] pursues objects
> which are determined for him, or at least seem to be
> determined for him, by the model. . . . We shall call this model
> the mediator of desire. . . . In most works of fiction, the
> characters have desires which are simpler. . . . There is no
> mediator, there is only the subject and the object.(2)

Central to Girard's claim is that mimetic desire is a desire to possess the "being" of one's model. "The object [of desire] is only a means of reaching the mediator. The desire is aimed at the mediator's *being*" (53). A subject of mimetic desire wants to become his/her model, yet this "being of the other," as Girard describes it, is illusory. The great novelists recount their previous enslavement to this illusion by depicting characters who vicariously embody the struggles which the mimetic myths have generated in the writers' own lives. The novelistic satire of Don Quixote's illusions, for example, reflects Cervantes' recapitulation of his own previous entanglement in certain romantic and, of course, "quixotic" fantasies.

For Girard, *romanticism* is the belief that one's desires are one's own and not the copy of another. He maintains that this romantic lie (*mensonge romantique*) captivates the heroes of the great novels. The illusion of being which mimetic desire seems to promise for the novelistic hero is part of this lie. Nevertheless, mimesis of a model can remain relatively tame and nonconflictual even though the model's attractiveness is based on a lie. Don Quixote, for example, never ceases to tilt at windwills, although his imitation of Amadis de Gaul will never grant him the divinity that giant-slaying appears to reward the great knights errant.

Harmony obtains between model and subject until the model desires an object which *cannot be shared*. When this happens, the subject's loudly proclaimed admiration for the model is stifled by an internalized envy. Unfortunately, now embroiled in self- and other-deception and in all of the rotten fruits of a hidden admiration for the other, the subject covets more and more the illusory being of his/her model-turned-obstacle. Nevertheless, the transition from admiration to feigned contempt for the model marks a downward spiral from resentment to envy and, ultimately, to hatred of the other. In many cases the model and subject will compete for an object which they both advertise to one another, and, thus, "mimetic rivalry" quickly deteriorates into *mutual* hatred and, in some cases, violence. The trail blazed by mimetic desire, sustained by the romantic lie, always tends toward death.

In our example, what Augustine continually searches for in the first eight books of the *Confessions* is the same elusive being desired by any subject of mimetic desire. Slave to the illusions depicted in his autobiography, Augustine's soul is restless until it finds *real* being. "My soul is not at rest, Lord, until it rests in you" (I:1). "Restless" in his searching for a transcendence that remains "deviated" (as Girard describes it), Augustine's pre-conversion

life consists of a wandering from idolized model to idolized model, none of whom can grant him what Christ, he claims, ultimately does.

Because Girard primarily analyzes the *phenomenological* dimensions of the subject's illusory belief in the being of the model, Avitol Wohlman argues that his explanation of desire falls short of the *ontological* components of Augustine's anthropology. Thus, Augustine's "presentation of desire is inscribed in an ontological order in light of a metaphysical and religious intuition where creation, participation, conversion, and knowledge of God are all interwoven" (272). Girard's ideas, she claims, do not account for these elements of existence.

Furthermore, Wohlman argues that Girard's schema does not allow for an explanation of existence outside of mimetic rivalry (276). Though she may be asking the mimetic theory to answer theological questions that it has not yet attempted to solve, her insight helps clarify exactly where Girard's view matches Augustine's own vision. Wohlman concludes that Girard's description of mimetic desire—the desire for an illusory being in an idolized model—is identical to Augustine's description of man's imitation of Satan. Satan offers a false copy of God's attributes and appears to possess divinity for those who imitate him. In this sense, desiring according to a rival, in the Girardian sense, is equivalent to following Satan in the Augustinian sense (264). More precisely, Girard's phenomenology of mimetic desire matches Augustine's explanation of satanic deception. *Mensonge romantique: c'est diabolique*!

How may one find release from the illusions governing self-destructive rivalry or Augustine's idea of imitation of Satan? For Girard, redemption from the mimetic bind requires a conversion in the deepest part of the soul, yet this transformation is often limited to the lives of a select few. In the literary realm, for example, only the great works testify to a writer's experience of this sort:

> A basic contention of this essay is that the great writers apprehend intuitively and concretely, through the medium of their art, if not formally, the system in which they were first imprisoned together with their contemporaries. (3)

Novelists conceive of their masterpieces largely as a result of their recognition of the romantic illusions in which they have been trapped. The great masterpieces are born when the novelist converts to a new understanding of

the truth of the mimetic relationship to his/her model and/or rival.[7] The apparent divinity (the illusion of "being") of the model suddenly crumbles, as the writer "renounces" slavery to this model/obstacle/idol:

> In renouncing divinity the hero renounces slavery. Every level of his existence is inverted, all the effects of metaphysical desire are replaced by contrary effects. Deception gives way to truth, anguish to remembrance, agitation to repose, hatred to love. (294; same page referenced by Harpham).

Augustine's testimony of his own enslavement to the dynamics of mimetic desire in his masterpiece, *The Confessions*, suggests that he experienced a similar conversion into the light of "novelistic truth."

In this respect, I disagree with Wohlman's position that Girard speaks of only one moment of conversion in the lives of the great novelists (262). She writes that "René Girard only analyzes conversion in terms of before and after without considering the event itself. [Yet] Augustine shows the interior dimensions of the conversion moment" (261). Wohlman then argues that "if conversion appears like a threshold between before and after, it is not accomplished in a single, decisive instant. The *Confessions* justly show, or try to show, the hesitations, resistances, and combat which precede the moment" (262). Whereas Wohlman claims that Augustine is more revealing than Girard is about the toils and trials of conversion, Girard never denies the possibility that a novelist may experience the same "agony" that Augustine does in the garden conversion of Book VIII.

Nevertheless, Wohlman is correct in showing that Augustine, and not Girard, delves into the complex issues of nature and grace when attempting to show the origin of conversion. Thus, she reproaches Girard for failing to account for the *source* of novelistic conversion. "One might ask Girard how conversion arrives, and if it is possible to prepare for it. One might reproach Girard for not being very explicit on this point" (260). She explains that Augustine's understanding of the interaction between divine grace and a natural human propensity to convert allows for his explanation of the origins of conversion (261). Because Girard's theological vision is limited, he falls short of Augustine's scope in this respect. Again, though, in critiquing Girard

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[7] Novelistic *truth* begins when the novelist perceives the former enslavement to the principles of the romantic *lie*. Hence, in French, Girard's book was titled *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, which translates in English: romantic lie and novelistic truth.

at this level, Wohlman seems to be asking Girard's theory to answer questions that have not yet been posed.[8] Yet, in her defense, perhaps her critique is nothing more than posing the question.

Ultimately, Wohlman appreciates that Girard's main work is textual comparison. He identifies a novelist's conversion by showing how earlier works exhibit less understanding of mimetic desire than later works do. This "before and after," as Wohlman describes it, points to a threshold of conversion, and signifies the moment where novelistic truth is born: it is the moment of "novelistic conversion." In the case of the *Confessions*, the author tells us himself that he has experienced a conversion, and this announcement is embedded in a "novelistic" recapitulation of the various paths down which mimetic desire has led him.[9]

Before concluding, I would like to acknowledge two areas of this analysis which require further research. First, I have not considered examples of non-mimetic desire in Augustine's text. There are a few of these examples. For example he changes schools because of poor students (V:14); no one mediates his desire for a better environment. This impels us to define a more accurate expression of which desires are mimetic and why. Further study might try to group the examples of non-mimetic desire and compare them to the examples which I have cited in this paper. Such a comparison might shed light on Augustine's residual romanticism at the time he wrote, or it might reveal other aspects of his anthropology which this study has been unable to address.

Second, it is still not clear that Augustine's garden-conversion in 386 was the actual moment that he discovered mimetic desire and embraced "novelistic truth." One must acknowledge the decade hiatus between this important moment and the actual writing of the *Confessions*. Harpham seems to believe that Augustine does discover the workings of mimesis as he renounces his pride of self-will in the famous garden scene (97). However, Peter Brown argues that Augustine would have written a far different book than the one we have today if he had begun his autobiography in 386. He explains that Augustine developed a greater preoccupation with feeling, the heart, and the

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[8] Wohlman's essay was written in 1985. Seven years later, Girard explained in an interview with Rebecca Adams that he "no longer [hesitates] to talk about theology. Wherever you have that desire, I would say, that really active positive desire for the other, there is some kind of divine grace present. This is what Christianity unquestionably tells us" (*The Girard Reader* 65). Is this what Augustine tells us, too? See "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard."

[9] Perhaps this "Girardian reading" helps explain why Peter Brown is compelled to say that Augustine's life in the *Confessions* is "conveyed as a vividly as any novel."

motivations of man during this decade of reflection. In 386, he was interested in issues "far more circumstantial," not "those inner strands of feeling" (77).

Brown suggests that Augustine experiences perhaps a more important conversion *after* 386, which becomes the real motivation for the writing of the *Confessions*.   Shortly after the garden episode and his baptism later, Augustine retired from his troublesome and stressful career of rhetoric. He travelled with Alypius to a gathering of meditative philosopher-Christians in Cassiciacum where he "moved in a circle of equals, of superior souls —serious, upright, well-educated, admirable within a single, widely-accepted, ideal of the perfect man" (155).

However, after several years of contemplation here, he is thrown into the world of the priesthood and is forced to confront the realities of life: "doomed to remain incomplete in his present existence, [knowing] that what he wished for most ardently would never be more than a hope" (156). His neo-Platonic/Christian ideal of perfect freedom from the chains of sin has been, perhaps, another model/obstacle in his life. Has he been competing with his fellow Christians in the race to escape the burdens of the flesh: a race for another illusory being that cannot be possessed?

It is this period in which he goes through "a reassessment of the nature of human motivation" (154). Again, where Brown emphasizes Augustine's need to explain the intricacies of grace and free will at this point in his life, it is possible that Augustine embraces one other project as well: the morphology of desire testified by the patterns we have seen in the *Confessions*, the explanation of the mimetic origin of desire. I suggest that, while Augustine experiences one conversion in the garden scene of 386, he does not experience the Girardian "novelistic conversion"—the profound humility that accompanies the discovery of the mimetic nature of his desires—until just before he writes the *Confessions*.[10]

Nevertheless, in order to proceed appropriately in locating at which point Augustine shifts from the romantic lie into novelistic truth, we need to compare the *Confessions* with texts that he wrote earlier than 397. Did his writing before the *Confessions* reflect less of an understanding of mimetic desire than the *Confessions* do? At what point between 386 and 397 does his anthropology of desire begin to stress mimesis?

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[10] See Brown (154-155). Augustine testifes to his friend Simplicianus in this period that he has had a profound new understanding of the work of St. Paul. Perhaps this experience reflects the transformation wrought by his "novelistic conversion."

In this essay, I have tried to show the common threads between Girard's anthropology of mimetic desire and the implicit message which Augustine conveys, as he retells his journey to Christianity in the *Confessions*. The copious examples of his previous enslavement to mimetic binds suggests that he has experienced a Girardian novelistic conversion which has allowed for his great insight into human nature—that which has made the *Confessions* a classic.

Writing biographies of Christian conversion was not uncommon in Augustine's day. Brown explains that "conversion had been the main theme of religious autobiography in the ancient world" (82). Furthermore, "pagan philosophers had already created a tradition of 'religious autobiography' . . . it will be continued by Christians in the fourth century, and will reach its climax in the *Confessions* of S. Augustine" (159). The *Confessions* were, of course, "a classic document of the tastes of a group of highly sophisticated men," especially those intellectual peers that modeled so many of Augustine's desires throughout his life. Yet "no other member of this group . . . wrote a book that even remotely resembles the *Confessions*" (160).

What makes Augustine's text unique is the same profound vision of man that allows Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky to go beyond the threshold of romantic mediocrity and reach the heights of literary genius. This vision of man is the vision of a universal human propensity to imitate our fellow human's desires, a vision born of a very special kind of conversion.

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CRUCIFIXION: ACCIDENT OR DESIGN?

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Downside Abbey

L ast year I was visited by an old friend from my Liverpool days. Mike and I had worked together with the young of the parish, and one summer the two of us took a couple of boys camping in France, a trial of patience which made us known to each other at some depth. He was in fact a passionately convinced Catholic, and very pastoral with it. We had many and long theological discussions. On his recent visit to Downside, I was showing him and some friends round our church, when, à propos of quite what I don't remember, he made a remark about the Catholic cult of suffering, and said, "and it's all because of the crucifixion, isn't it? Why don't we recognize that the crucifixion was an accident?" I didn't react, because I was dumbfounded at what seemed to be the denial of the mystery of the cross by a friend who I had no reason to believe had stopped being a Catholic. And I'm sure he hasn't. He would certainly have told me if he had.

It has taken me over a year to figure out what is going on here, and this would not have been possible without intensive study of the work of René Girard. The only alternative to saying that the crucifixion was an accident is to say that it was "ordained by God." It is only as ordained by God that this horrible event could be presented to people as a divine affirmation that suffering is to be sought and espoused. Also, it is only as ordained by God that the crucifixion can be thought of as "appeasing God" in some way. Both the moral and the dogmatic implication of the crucifixion—that suffering is a good thing, and that God required a victim—are grounded in the notion that God required the crucifixion of his Son. And it is because this idea is quite unacceptable, unworthy of God and of the human mind made in God's image, that my friend concludes that the crucifixion was *not* required by God, not written into the eternal scheme of things, but an accident.

Once the problem is clarified in these terms, more and more instances come to mind, of rejection, by Christians and others, of the whole divine ordination of the cross. Gore Vidal refers to Christianity as "that lugubrious religion." Mary Hunt, a prominent American Catholic feminist, introduced a workshop with the statement, "we are not about naked guys nailed to crosses, blood all over the place!" Where divine ordering *is* accepted the special painfulness and darkness of the idea is noted. Anselm refers to the doctrine as the Narnia Chronicles, to commend the notion, by referring to a dark law written into the nature of things beyond our comprehension. The children's suggestion that Aslan should simply not comply with the Snow Queen's requirement is rejected by Aslan with a mysterious impatience—the children just haven't grown up, like the romantics who, according to Matthew Arnold, "did not know enough."

Again, during a day on "the roots of violence" that I led here yesterday there was much questioning about the role of God the Father in the crucifixion. The problem is crystallized in the famous cry from the cross, "Why have you forsaken me?" To my confessedly lame suggestion that Jesus was "only quoting a psalm," someone remarked, "to quote that psalm at that juncture and not mean it, is somewhat misleading!" Again it's the same problem. How can God be understood as ordaining the crucifixion, compatibly with the notion of God as all-loving which Christianity of course affirms? Hans Urs Von Balthasar, who is 90% pro-Girard, in the other 10% wants to hold on to something he calls "the wrath of God."

Thus the seeming necessity of having God require and ordain the crucifixion is the main crisis of Christian belief. The six-year-old Willie, in Thomas Klise's amazing novel, *The Last Western*, puts the problem with childlike directness. He keeps interrupting catechism class with, "Why did God kill Jesus?" and is shushed by Sister. I recall that Illtyd Trethowan said to me toward the end of his life, "I hope you take seriously your responsibility to free people from notions of the redemption that make God a monster."

But is saying that the cross was an accident the only way of avoiding a monster notion of God, such as seems to be implied in saying it was ordained by God? Here is a suggestion. Instead of merely *avoiding* making God a monster (by saying that the crucifixion was an accident), how about asking what is going on *psychologically* when we think of God as a monster? Another way of getting at the point I want to make is to ask, "is it only the seeming necessity of Christian doctrine that makes of God a monster?" and answering with an emphatic negative. Distrust of God is endemic. So let us keep the discussion psychological, and ask what is going on when I think of

anyone as a monster? I am projecting something dark in myself onto him. The projectionist in my psyche is throwing the image of my unknown and feared side onto the screen of another person. Why should not this be happening when I say, "God, who says he loves me, would have to be a monster if showing this love involved the crucifixion of his Son?" Suppose, I mean, that what I am really saying here is that the cruel God of Calvary *only confirms* the way I am inclined to think of God anyway, as when Marilyn French, author of *The Women's Room*, a book that has made me a feminist for life, says, "I wouldn't want to live forever with the being who made the world—and look at the way he treated his son!" And suppose I am to learn, from the crucifixion as God's way of showing love to me, *something about myself* that I never quite face? Suppose this is like a moment in psycho-analysis when my shrink is "on the money" and I don't like it. Suppose the "necessity" that God is respecting in this affair is not some dark law written into the nature of things, but dark need in myself?

What might this dark need be? Here we turn the searchlight that we had been training on "God" back on ourselves, our politics, our relations at every level, our family life, our friendships, our whole conduct of the task of living together, our global economy. Here the name of the game is projection, seeing ourselves in each other, seeing our desires acted out in each other and envying and fearing in consequence. And how do we stabilize these conflictual situations? We should know by now: the safety-valve is scapegoating. And who might be our ultimate scapegoat? Who better than the power to which we owe our very existence? Now look at the story of Jesus. He claims, openly and emphatically, to *represent* this power. "I and the Father are one," even if he never said in so many words, he was understood as saying. So, as representatives of the ultimate scapegoat, he is the ultimate *human* scapegoat. So the crucifixion is the ultimate act of scapegoating in which at last it is possible for God-the-ultimately-scapegoated to "reply" to all our anguish, to reply to the Nietzsche in all of us who, more than we know it, rage at him, to reply in the person of our scapegoat-victim returned from the death we have inflicted on him.

So at last, the age-old "Christian" idea of a "mysterious" God brooding over the blood of his Son and, for reasons of his own that are "a great mystery," opening-up heaven to us in token of this bloodshed, gives way to: God the scapegoat of a self-ignorant and turbulent humanity, revealing his scapegoated nature in the crucifixion of his Son or Word, who, risen from the dead, shows us the love that in scapegoating him we repel. When Paul writes of "the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," he is describing Jesus as God's

loving touch entering into the last recalcitrant depths of our being and curing us at root of the fear that scapegoats, at root, God himself. He is describing an ecstatic moment in his own life, a moment that Teresa knew and Bernini translated almost indecently into marble and, *mutatis mutandis*, into a recent video that has run foul of the blasphemy laws. He is not talking of a "love" that reaches us through a chain of reasoning to do with Adam and Eve and all that.

Once God has indeed "been allowed to be God" in the drama of the crucifixion of his Son, the age-old split between the dogma and the ethic of Christianity vanishes. What is implanted in us by "the word of the cross" is freedom from the victimizing that makes us an unloving collective. The phrase, "Let God be God!" is Luther's. And yet Luther's God unleashes all the fury of divine justice on the tortured body of his Son. So he had a long way to go.

Still, it is odd that it has taken us twenty centuries to turn that searching light back onto ourselves. But we are quite used to hearing that we have not begun to follow the Sermon on the Mount, that in the words of Chesterton, Christianity has not been tried and failed but been found too difficult and not tried. Might it not be very helpful to show a *corresponding* failure in the sphere of Christian self-understanding? The content of Christian dogma, the astonishing fact of liberation through a cross, not understood, has failed to motivate us to take the risk that Jesus took and demands of us.

For motivation is in the imagination. And what has Christian preaching done for the imagination in this vital matter of presenting the crucifixion as our liberation from bondage? Yet what has tantalized the imagination and its artists more than the crucifixion? The pastoral consequence would be considerable if—as Helen Waddell thought of Abelard as hoping—we could learn to think of our image of God as the compassionate one as set free in us by the crucifixion of Jesus. Some accident!

What now becomes of God "ordaining" the crucifixion? What becomes, in other words, of the idea the seeming repulsiveness of which drives my friend to call the crucifixion an accident? God's ordaining of the crucifixion is repulsive if there is nothing in the mind of Jesus that *corresponds* to this divine intention, for then we have a Jesus whom some interior God-implanted mechanism drives to the cross, he doesn't know why, and this is a brutal idea. Interestingly, Alice Miller, the apostle of the abused child who has been vastly influential, sees Jesus as subject to a tyrannical imaginary divine Father with a taste for blood, only humanized by his "real" father Joseph, during quiet hours in the atelier. In the matter of Jesus, as with sex, the rule is: You name

it, somebody's thought it! And of course the rejection of the divine decreeing of the cross is motivated by the absence of any conceivable motivation in Jesus that could have humanly and not morbidly gone with it.

In other words, in speaking of Jesus as disarming the whole system of scapegoating in going to the cross, we are saying something about the mind of Jesus. And here we run into one of the shibboleths of modern scholarship, that "we can know nothing of the psychology of Jesus." The *mind* of Jesus, it is said, is a closed book to us—although Paul says we *have* that mind!

Having that mind through the grace of the Crucified, let us boldly say this: The mind of Jesus was a mind that saw the world as God sees it—and as the astronauts saw it translated by technology into a visual aid, a ravishing blue ball in space—the human world knit in love as opposed to the human world knit by the tortuous relationships that are only stabilized by scapegoating. Definitely a world worth dying for! But a realistic vision of such a world, such an effective kingship of God, a vision of that world in this world, would say something about the political future of him who has this vision. To have this vision realistically is to know that my life is to go into its implementation. The road to the cross is the translation of Utopia out of Platonic abstraction into the brutal world we live in. In his book *Raising Abel*, James Alison calls this personal appropriation by Jesus of the "eschatological imagination" (his phrase) "the intelligence of the victim." José Comblin says that there seems to have been an understanding among the first preachers that "the Reign of God" was Jesus' own expression that they were never quite understood. It was part of the implicit autobiography of the man born of God.

The Sermon on the Mount, with what Bishop Christopher Butler called its wild exaggerations, comes out of this mind. It does not come out of a bumped-up categorical imperative. Harnack said that Jesus speaks of profound moral truths as though they were fruit to be plucked easily from trees. Why do these generous nuggets of scholarly insight get lost in the maze of scholarship?

Very serious evidence of this mind in Jesus is found in the written memory of the evangelists. The blazing statement in Luke, about casting fire on the earth and having a baptism wherewith he is to be baptized, cannot be ignored, nor can the self-identification with the Suffering Servant, nor, supremely and climactically, can the words spoken over the bread and the wine, words that identify him as edible and drinkable—I remember an author called Arland Usher saying that artists know something about being eaten and drunk. What is the matter with us, that we can miss all this? What is the matter with us is what Jesus died because of and for and in the hope of transforming.

In short, the mind of Jesus is a mind enraptured with the glory of God in a murderous world and thus destined, without any morbidity, to be that world's victim. Let me say in all honesty, that really to understand the victimhood of Jesus in its transforming uniqueness is a grace, sometimes given in prayer, more often given in Christian praxis.

That early Christian hymn quoted by Paul in Philippians 2:6 says that to confess Jesus as Lord is "to the glory of God the Father." It is to let that glory flood our minds. That glory is what bursts upon and inundates the mind and heart when the scapegoat-subverting work of Jesus is completed in the soul of the believer and the inseparable community. To believe in this God is to be in heaven—with all one's earthiness, for the demonic interpretation of the earthly has been swept away. The Christ-informed mystic, in being at one with the One, has no sense of escaping anything, for there is now nothing to be escaped from. The world of death has been disempowered by the blood of the Lamb. This is what it means to be "bought with a great price." But this and all similar texts have to be translated from the language of victimage and appeasement in which they are too easily read and in which they are, in part, couched, as is proved by the fact that they *have* been so read for the greater part of Christian history so far.

To say that God through the death and resurrection of his victim Son is thereby cleared of all the suspicion that has attached to him since our time began, is true, but arrogant. Once God has been cleared for, I see the preposterousness of putting him in the dock. One might as well talk of clearing Cézanne of being a kitsch artist. In religious apologetics, humor is the first casualty.

Still, if we *may* speak of the event as clearing God, we may certainly say that God is cleared of most of what has set him in *opposition* to the Buddhist Nirvana. Historically, much of the Christian concept of God that has set him in this opposition is a concept not cleared by the event of Golgotha and the Upper Room. An adequate soteriology cannot but aid Christian-Buddhist dialogue. An inadequate soteriology is of course "kept out of sight" (to echo the song) in the dialogue. Has there *been* a dialogue in which the Christian party has consciously represented God as cleared of blood and death in an event of blood and death? I doubt it.

The thought in this article is of course that of René Girard. Girard is often criticized as offering an all-about-everything system. I see him, rather, as an outsider to theology bringing anthropology to the rescue of our soteriology. And our traditional soteriology is, as I have implied, a God-awful bloody mess. Beggars can't be choosers! Now once the crucifixion and its

pentecostal eschatological sequel is understood as the coming of the true God out of the clouds of our religionising, we have to stop thinking of a God we can think of apart from this understanding as ordaining the crucifixion. The God who, in that sense and on that supposition, ordered the crucifixion is the old God sated immemorially with the blood of victims animal and human. Jesus rid us of him, and gave us instead his Father and ours.

Alison has suggested that the understanding of God as creating out of nothing comes from the standpoint of those who have been to the edge of human experience. In the second Book of Maccabees, for example, the mother of the seven Jewish youths slaughtered by the king for their faith comes out with the once clear statement of this doctrine in the Old Testament (2 Macc 7:28). Is it not possible that the thing that really taught us to disidentify God with the powers-that-be and thus discover the doctrine of a God who creates out of nothing as opposed to imposing order on chaos as do the powers of this world, was the fact that a man executed by those powers is God? A very homely and radical way of awaking to the most profound philosophic truth about God! Jesus you got yourself executed by the Establishment to make it quite clear that the Establishment is not God and God not like the Establishment. Thus you effected, for our emotional and feeling life not just the intellectual, the sundering of God from all that we know as power. God is neither defined as the legitimator of power in the world nor—and is this the same thing?—the fashioner out of pre-existing material on which he would impose the *sort* of order that worldly power imposes on what is to hand. Nothing is "to hand" for God. God is not like the power that uses what is to hand.

> To hands that make everything out of nothing
> Nothing is there to hand: the Lord of glory
> Was crucified to make this clear to us.
> The hands that shape our world have executed
> Creation's Lord who cries out: Look! Pierced hands!

Paul was deeply impressed by this aspect of the Christ event. He went so far as to say that Christ had "become a curse for us" in terms of the still remnant idea of power as holy that had dictated the saying he quotes, "Cursed be the man who hangs on a tree!" If you're on the wrong side of the Law, you're on the wrong side of God, is what is there being said. Wrong! says Paul. And what about the "powers" that Paul sees Christ as leading in his victory triumph

as prisoners of war? Are they just bad angels? Surely not. He sees "the rulers of the present age" as "crucifying the Lord of glory."

The crucifixion, death and presence after death of Jesus is the climactic and final moment in a very long and slow process of coming to know the real God, for this process is one of disidentifying God with power as we know it in being like power in the world, God is crucified by this power. Disidentified with ruling power, God is identified with the victim of this power, the scapegoat whose killing keeps the power in place. Thus the demystification of the scapegoat, which is the demythologizing of sacrifice, is the disclosure of a God who has nothing in him of the forceful quality of earthly rule. And God's crowning dissimilarity with such power consists in this: that unlike the power which imposes order on an existing chaos, this power has no pre-existing chaos to impose order on. Creation out of nothing becomes clear for the first time when the killing and resurrection of the Son of God finally disidentifies God with power as we know it, such power figuring here only as the power that crucifies. Amazingly, the unmasking of the scapegoat, the disqualification of earthly power as the image of God's power, and the discovery of creation out of nothing, are one and the same revelation.

We are so used to the understanding of creation from nothing as an intellectual exercise, that we fail to realize that the disclosure to us of this mystery is made in the language of human intercourse with all its power-plays, its recourse to scapegoating whose final collapse with Jesus reveals the nakedness of the Emperor.

In Sum:
In one event, as one event, (1) the scapegoat as base of society is no more; (2) the earthly power that rests on the scapegoat is no more the absolute; (3) God therefore is no more like this power, does not impose order on pre-existing chaos but creates out of nothing; (4) death as absolute, the reign of death, is swept away; (5) death in war, the glory of this world, is swallowed in a death that we proclaim until all this is all, God all in all; (6) a new society is born, not held together by mimetic desire and so dependent for its coherence on scapegoating, but having as mimesis-model Christ, himself modeled on God, and thus knit by mimetic desire liberated and eager for good works, this God-initiated love called agape; (7) to the God and Father who now at last comes into his own, all are alive forever. "He is not a God of the dead but of the living."

The radical disidentification here is of God with death. Humankind is cursed with double vision as regards the ultimate and controlling reality

grounding our life. We feel bounded by God and by death in an unclear consortium. In the Christ event this double vision gives way to a clear focus, in which God alone is our ground and death a mere fact of physical existence, making no claim on the soul of man.

> The scapegoat underpins the Emperor
> Who crucifying Jesus voids the power
> With which the Father disidentifying
> Is for us able to be God at last.
> Imposing order thus undoes itself
> For God to come upon us in his glory
> Whose naming glorious is irony:
> If glory crucifies the Lord of glory
> What meaning is there left in that bright word?

In briefest, the Good News is that God is love and has allowed us to kill his Son to discover that the violence in our hearts has love itself for its victim and its healer. Paul says as much. "God did not spare his own Son, but handed him over for all of us." "Handed him over," not "arranged for him to be a sacrifice that would satisfy him!" When people lose the dramatic sense of words, there's nothing to be done in language as they then understand it.

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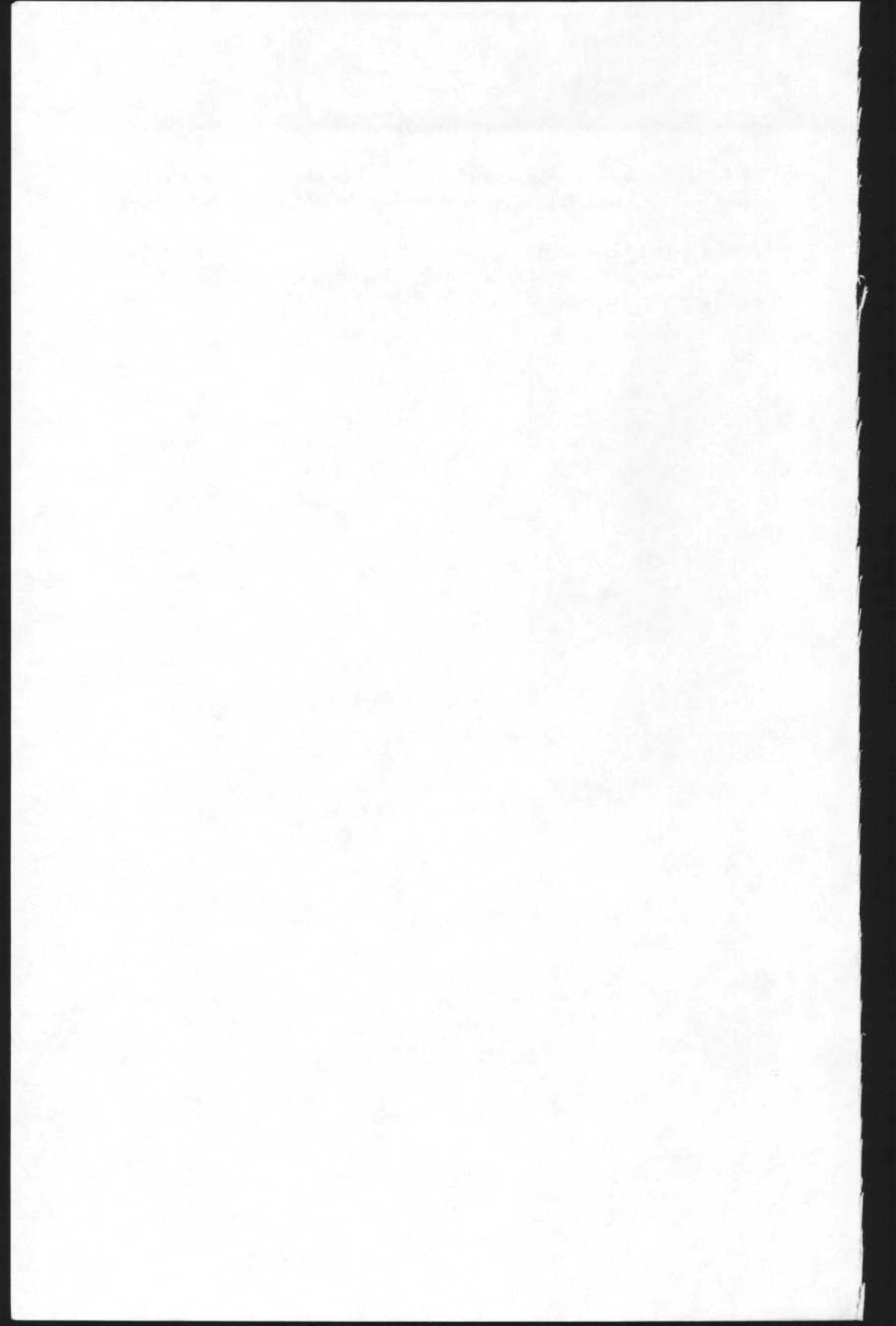
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