Editor's Introduction: Literature as Theory

For over thirty years, René Girard has been one of the most influential thinkers in the humanities. His works have been translated into numerous languages and have been the subject of a constant stream of commentary. The bibliography of secondary sources dealing wholly or in part with his oeuvre now numbers in the hundreds of articles and over fifty full-length books. In 1990, a research colloquium (COV&R—Colloquium on Violence and Religion) was formed in order to further the study of Girard's thought. Its annual meeting brings together theologians, literary scholars, philosophers, psychologists, and anthropologists from Europe and North America.[1]

Best known for his ideas about archaic religion, myth, and the Bible, which he developed in a stunning series of publications starting in the 1970s, Girard's writings on literature have to some extent been overshadowed by his work in religious anthropology. This is unfortunate, for literary studies has always been at the center of Girard's professional career, and the mainspring of his thought—his theory of mimetic desire—evolved out of his reading of literary texts.

This volume of René Girard's uncollected writings on modern literature and literary theory is thus long overdue, for in addition to presenting some of Girard's best and most powerful work, which deserves to be better known, this anthology offers a panoramic view of Girard's unique ideas on the place of literature in modern intellectual life—that is, of his views on how literature relates to the domains of social science, cultural theory, psychology, philosophy, and religious studies. Particularly for those for whom Girard's contribution to literary studies is restricted to his first book, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (*Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, 1961), these essays will reveal, more consciously and more explicitly, the interdisciplinary matrix that informs Girard's approach to the literary text.

In this introduction, I will draw out the implications of Girard's critical approach by situating it in its historical and intellectual context.

Literature and Theory

René Girard was born in Avignon, France, in 1923. During his formative years, he studied at the Ecole des Chartes in Paris, where he was trained as a medieval archivist. After receiving his diploma in 1947, he was recruited to teach French in the United States, and he decided to stay, taking a Ph.D. in History from Indiana University in 1950. Soon after, Girard sought employment in departments of French literature. A year in the Romance Languages Department at Duke University was followed by an appointment at Bryn Mawr. In 1957, he joined the faculty of Johns Hopkins University, where he was granted tenure and published many of his most important works. He left Johns Hopkins in 1971 to become a Distinguished Professor in the English Department at the State University of New York at Buffalo. He returned to Johns Hopkins in 1976 as the John M. Beall Professor of the Humanities. In 1981, Girard moved west, becoming Andrew B. Hammond Professor at Stanford University, where he was affiliated with the departments of French and Italian, and Comparative Literature. He officially retired in 1995, but returned to teach courses at Stanford in 2000, 2003, and 2004. Girard was elected to the Académie Française in 2005.

Girard's career coincides with a crucial period in the development of literary studies in the United States. He witnessed firsthand the revolutionary changes of the 1960s and 1970s, which reshaped the field and led to a seismic shift in what had hitherto been a rather conservative discipline. Girard was a co-organizer, along with Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, of the famous 1966 conference held at Johns Hopkins University (where he was a professor of French at the time) entitled "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man."[2] This conference, which brought to prominence such thinkers as Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida, was a watershed event in the reception of French thought in the United States, for within the space of a few years these names would come to dominate the critical landscape. Though Girard would soon cast a wary eye on what he saw as a new orthodoxy, this initial burst of interdisciplinary

enthusiasm no doubt encouraged Girard to explore the more far-reaching implications of his own thought.[3]

Subsequently, Girard's name became associated with the avatars of "French Theory." His 1972 monograph, *Violence and the Sacred* (translated in 1977, one year after the translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* appeared), became a touchstone of the critical theory genre and made a name for him in the United States.[4] This book, which featured lengthy critiques of Freud and Lévi-Strauss and made reference to Derrida and Lacan, was interpreted by many as being part of the "post-structuralist" movement in French thought.[5] However, the convergence was more coincidental than essential. Girard had arrived at a similar crossroads as these other thinkers, but he had come on a different path and was traveling toward a very different destination.

At first, Girard welcomed this new expansion of literary studies. Inspired by the linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, structuralist criticism had created a bridge between literary studies and the human sciences. In a 1966 article, "Critical Reflections on Literary Studies," published in *Modern Language Notes* (and included in this volume), Girard spoke about "renewal" and the need to reconfigure literary studies so that it could more effectively dialogue with other disciplines and approaches. At that time, Girard was a defender of the critical avant-garde, which was under fierce attack from the literary establishment: "In the [human sciences] we see a new enemy, and not the opportunity they offer to renew literary studies, to emerge finally from the crisis which engulfs us." Feeling that the type of criticism practiced in the American academy (and, in France, at institutions such as the Sorbonne) was stale, reactionary, and in desperate need of revitalization, Girard thought that the *nouvelle critique* would be able to lead literary studies out of its "crisis."

In the 1950s and 1960s, literature departments in the United States were dominated by New Criticism, a type of formalism or aestheticism which isolated the literary text from non-literary disciplines and methodologies. In France, on the other hand, literary history was the dominant force. Strongly influenced by nineteenth-century positivism and diametrically opposed to New Criticism, literary history concerned itself primarily with the study of context and authorial biography, paying relatively scant attention to the literary works themselves. While Girard found useful elements in

these two rival methodologies, he rejected both the anti-scientific aestheticism of the former and the scientific anti-aestheticism of the latter.

Girard's own approach to the literary text is quite unique in the annals of literary criticism, for it does not so much draw on a particular critical school as it derives its ideas from the texts it comments upon. This does not mean that a particular theoretical content is abstracted from the imaginative work, in the way that Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* can be seen as making explicit the "philosophy" behind *The Stranger*, or that Sartre's *Nausea* can be considered a literary supplement to *Being and Nothingness*. In these examples, literature is seen as merely illustrative of a thought that is non-literary in nature. What Girard is aiming at, however, is the notion that the imaginative text can be as "critical" as the critical text, and can even usurp it. Girard thus reads literature to illuminate psychoanalysis or structuralism, rather than the other way around. The imaginative or narrative text is critical, in the sense that the best of these contain profound insights into the human condition. What is required, then, is a manner of reading that involves a complete redefinition of the role and purview of literature.

Thus, what Girard offers us is not a theory of literature or a theory that makes use of literature for some other end, but literature *as* theory. This does not, however, involve reducing literature to abstract statements; nor is it a matter of imposing a theoretical model on a text that is dutifully expected to conform to it. Girard sees the literary text as an embodiment of an intuitive understanding of the human condition, providing the tools necessary for both its own analysis and the analysis of literary criticism itself.

One can, I believe, discern three basic principles that underlie Girard's critical practice: (1) the literary work reveals significant structures or forms of human comportment, which can be considered on a par with any of the human sciences (psychology, anthropology, sociology); (2) there is a dynamic and essential relation between author and work; and (3) literary theory and cultural theory are one, in the sense that the great literary text is concerned with what is essential in the human experience from the perspective of a specific historical moment. The first principle could be described as "structural"; the second as "existential"; and the third, "historical." Though generally underemphasized in relation to the universal

structures of human interaction that he develops in his mimetic readings, the historical aspect of Girard's thought is a crucial part of his critical approach. Girard was trained as a historian, and all of his work is infused with an acute awareness of the historical dimension of the texts he treats. One can perceive this most directly in two of his early essays, included in this volume: "History in Saint-John Perse" and "Classicism and Voltaire's Historiography."

I will now present a general outline of the structural level, often called the "theory of mimetic desire" or simply "mimetic theory," which, as mentioned above, developed out of an engagement with literary texts.

Mimetic Theory

I will only briefly discuss Girard's theory here, given the rich secondary literature on the topic.[6] However, I think the best general introduction to mimetic theory is contained in Girard's postface to his book on Dostoevsky, entitled "Mimetic Desire in the Underground" (included in this volume).

It is generally accepted that all cultural transmission (language, customs, values) is a product of imitation. However, there is one type of imitation that is systematically excluded from the concept of imitation: *the imitation of desire.*[7] On Girard's account, we do not desire spontaneously, but according to another person; we imitate the Other's desire. Desire does not have its origin in the self or in the object, but in a third party. Put another way: there is always a level of social mediation between my desire and its object.[8] Imitative or mimetic desire can therefore also be termed *mediated* desire—a desire that is never fully my own. Girard thus replaces an object-oriented conception of desire (which he alternately terms "romantic," individualistic, or rationalistic) with an intersubjective or "inter-individual" conception predicated on the power of the social.

The consequences of this seemingly simple idea are enormous, and they stem from the relationship between the imitator and the mediator, or model, of desire. In traditional and pre-modern societies, which are based on rigid hierarchies and strict lines of authority, the distance between models and imitators tends to be very large or even absolute (the models may also be mythical, or may derive from an earlier civilization). In

such societies, mediation is itself a function of hierarchy, and thus there is little possibility for mediators and imitators to become rivals or otherwise come into conflict with one another. Girard calls the type of mediation that predominates in these societies "external," since the mediator generally lies outside the realm of the imitator's sphere of action. External mediation most often takes the form of explicit veneration or admiration.

Within a specific caste or peer group, the possibility for imitation to lead to rivalry is ever present, due to the social and spatial proximity of the actors. Girard terms this type of mediation "internal," for it involves relations within a given sphere that can give rise to conflict. In internal imitation, the mediator is both a model of and an obstacle to desire. He embodies the double-bind "Imitate me; do not imitate me"; that is to say, with a single gesture he designates the object to be desired even as he reserves it for himself. In our modern world, where class distinctions are much weaker and no longer place limitations on desire, imitation, particularly of the internal variety, is far more widespread and pervasive. The more the individual frees himself from the formal expressions of authority (tradition, religion—the imitation of transcendental models), the more his imitation is turned toward his neighbor, thereby multiplying the interfaces and increasing the intensity. In other words, the more "individual" we become—the more we exalt ourselves as autonomous, self-sufficient, original, and spontaneous—the more we are in fact determined by others. Though modern societies do institutionalize types of imitation that are openly expressed (such as economic competition or the notion of the role model), the imitation of our peers is most often hidden or disavowed. Individualism does not release us from the chains of mimesis; it makes the chains invisible even as it binds us more tightly. In his essay "Innovation and Repetition" (included in this volume), Girard shows how the shift from imitation being perceived as positive and originality as negative, to originality being perceived as positive and imitation as negative, occurred virtually overnight, and came about as a result of the Enlightenment concept of the individual.

As egalitarianism began to take hold in the wake of the French Revolution, writers and thinkers became horrified at the idea of being lost in the crowd. The notion of the individual was no longer tied to the rise of the bourgeoisie, as it was in the eighteenth century; the true individual

was now the *exceptional* being. This anti-bourgeois hyper-individualism reaches its zenith in the Romantic subject, which counterposes a heroic individuality to the indistinct mass of uncomprehending others. The failure of the Romantic hero to halt the march toward social leveling finds its dialectical double in the post-Romantic antihero (Flaubert, Dostoevsky). But this inverted subjectivity retains the same sordid dialectic between self and other, the individual and the social, which persists all the way into the existentialist thought of Heidegger and Sartre.[9] Ultimately, Girard argues, individualism is a religious form of anti-religion. The "secularization" of the modern world does not herald the transcendence or abandonment of religious structures, but their perversion. The search for individuality reveals itself to be a latter-day theology of the self: the replacement of God by the human subject, which is affirmed as the locus of all meaning and authority (Nietzschean pride). But it is at this moment that the specter of the Other reveals itself most powerfully and unwelcomingly. In Girard's view, the greatest modern authors are those who are both attracted to but who are ultimately able to see through the individualistic illusion that endeavors to place a god-like self beyond the influence of others.

Like many twentieth-century thinkers, Girard is attempting to overcome the inveterate solipsism of the philosophical tradition, both ancient and modern, in which the "Other" is invariably reduced to an aspect of self. Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity and Jürgen Habermas's intersubjective discourse ethics also represent attempts to overcome solipsism. Though there are points of contact, Girard differs from these thinkers in that he does not aim to found an ethics or a politics, but to discover the true nature of human interaction. That is to say, he is concerned neither with the ethical meaning of existence that the presence of others entails, nor with the normative character of communication; it is actual human comportment as a function of the concrete relations between Self and Other that Girard seeks to explicate. Girard's anthropological perspective puts the ethical meaning of this interrelation in brackets, as it were, in order to better understand its various implications. For Girard, mimetic desire is always an opening toward the Other, and thus any "Girardian ethics" would have to start there.

In Girard's major works of religious anthropology—*Violence and the Sacred*, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, and *The*

Scapegoat—he expands his mimetic insights into a full-blown genetic theory of culture. An explanation of these works lies outside the scope of this introduction; but suffice it to say that the mimetic theory always lies at the heart of Girard's thinking.

Mimesis and Psychoanalysis

Sigmund Freud is perhaps Girard's most important interlocutor, for it was Freud who put the concept of desire on the intellectual map, as it were, obliging all subsequent reflections on the human psyche to take his theory into account. Prior to Freud, the concept of desire had been considered the province of novelists and poets, and Freud himself tells us that he was greatly influenced by his reading of literature and myth. Curiously, Girard does not mention Freud in his first book (*Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*), precisely where one might have expected it. In fact, this was a conscious strategy on Girard's part to avoid his study being lumped with the mass of commentaries on psychoanalysis.[10] He wished to completely separate the mimetic theory of desire from Freud's vision. However, he soon realized that a dialogue with psychoanalysis would not only be fruitful, but necessary.

It is Freud's use of myth, particularly of the Oedipus myth and the myth of Narcissus, that Girard has found most intriguing from the perspective of desire. Let us first take the theory of the Oedipus complex. Girard accepts the Oedipal logic that there is a triangular relation between self, object, and obstacle, but reproaches Freud for not seeing the essential role of imitation in this paradigm. Freud weds himself to the notion of an incest-patricide drive that expresses the innate desire of the male child for the mother. What Freud does not realize, though he often comes close, according to Girard, is that the child's desire is modeled on that of the father; hence the child's imitation is prior to and generative of his conflict and rivalry with the father. Girard interprets Freud's doctrine of the Superego (or Ego ideal) as compensating for this inability to see the father as a model in the Oedipus complex. Ultimately, Girard sees the fatal flaw of psychoanalysis as its inability to overcome solipsism. Contenting itself with the positing of intra-psychical relationships (those between Ego, Id, and Superego), psychoanalysis refuses to follow the path to the Other that Freudian notions like "identification" should have necessitated.[11]

Girard's substantial article on Sartre ("Bastards and the Antihero in Sartre," included in this volume), written just a few years after *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, offers a glimpse into Girard's thinking on psychoanalysis well before his formal engagement with Freud in *Violence and the Sacred*. Prompted by the appearance of Sartre's autobiographical essay *The Words* (*Les mots*) in 1964, Girard is moved to reconsider Sartre's entire oeuvre, both philosophical and literary, in terms of its own concepts. Girard locates the birth of the Sartrean antihero in the young Sartre's Oedipal veneration of his grandfather, as described in *The Words*. Sartre identifies with and admires his grandfather; he desires all that his grandfather desires; he desires *to be* his grandfather, who is his model. At some point, Sartre feels the need to assert his own self, which he does by rejecting all that his grandfather represents. But this rejection is only a more extreme form of imitation. In his earlier works, such as *Nausea*, Sartre employs the figure of the antihero to manifest his rejection of the bourgeois values embodied by his grandfather. But the antihero is always a hero in disguise, for in denouncing all the others, the antihero is claiming that he is the only authentic being. Sartre thought that he was dispossessing himself of his Superego—that is, of his relation to the transcendental model, the father-figure—by rejecting the grandfather and embracing the role of the antihero. But, as Girard writes, Sartre is in fact the "proud owner of an inverted Superego. . . . The anti-Superego is a super-Superego that increases the demands of a Superego whose tyranny it claims to reject."[12] In a nutshell, what Girard seeks to show is that behind the gesture to rid oneself of the model one always finds the will *to be* the model, a will that is unaware of itself. Girard uses dialectical turns of phrase to express the paradoxical nature of human desire, and in particular its "bad faith" (*la mauvaise foi*), a Sartrean concept that Girard here turns against the master.

In essence, Girard accuses existentialist "bad faith" of being in bad faith. Existentialism is a rejection of bourgeois individualism in the name of an individualism more extreme and more "bourgeois" than the one it critiques. Girard argues this point with panache in his "Memoirs of a Dutiful Existentialist: Simone de Beauvoir" (included in this volume). Commenting on de Beauvoir's assertion that for her "the idea of salvation had survived the disappearance of God," Girard writes: "How can we save ourselves, concretely, in the absence of God, if not by surpassing our fellow human beings in all sorts of worldly endeavors?"

Though he rarely theorizes it explicitly, the concept of "bad faith," or "self-deception," is fundamental to Girard's conception of the psyche and to his theory of mimetic desire. In "Marivaudage, Hypocrisy, and Bad Faith" (included in this volume), Girard defines bad faith as the "obvious fact that we are not always clearly aware of our deepest motivations." The dynamic of mimetic desire presupposes a minimal awareness of its operation; otherwise, its truth would not be so violently repressed or denied, as in internal mediation. If everyone were always aware of the true nature of their desires and their relations with others, they would not behave paradoxically or contradictorily. Furthermore, as Girard argues in his essay "Narcissism: The Freudian Myth Demythified by Proust" (included in this volume), "You must be a dupe of your own comedy to play it with conviction." That is to say, any strategic advantage in the realm of desire is necessarily the product of a self-deception—and this is no more effectively shown than in the phenomenon of *narcissism*.

Girard credits Marcel Proust as being his guide for his deconstruction of Freud's notion of narcissism. In his essay on Proust and Freud, mentioned above, Girard provides perhaps the most explicit demonstration of his idea that literary intuitions are coequal—and often superior—to corresponding reflections in philosophy and the human sciences.[13] As in the Oedipus complex, Freud sees narcissism in terms of a pathology of the self: the narcissistic person (quintessentially artists and women, according to Freud) retains something of the "natural" narcissism of the child, and thus can be said to be "immature." Contrary to Freud, Proust shows that, paradoxically and contrary to all appearances, one can be simultaneously self-oriented and other-oriented. Girard notes how Proust's narrator experiences an intense attraction to a group of girls (*une bande à part*) who ignore him, realizing that it is because they ignore him that they fascinate him. The flaunting of the narcissist's lack of desire—the aura of self-sufficiency projected by the narcissist—captivates the observer who dreams of the autonomy of which the narcissist appears to be a shining example. Desiring the Other's autonomy is a contradictory enterprise doomed to fail, thereby confirming the narcissist's superiority and increasing his or her prestige. Narcissism is thus revealed as a *strategy* to attract desire, rather than as a psychological condition. The narcissist's self-desire is really a mimetic device that allows the narcissist to be both the mediator and the object of desire.

In reality, the narcissist is no more autonomous than anyone else. The narcissist too is influenced by the others he spurns, for his self-love increases when it is reflected in the Other's admiring gaze. More properly speaking, then, this phenomenon should be termed "pseudo-narcissism," for narcissism is ultimately a form of reciprocity masquerading as non-reciprocity.

Author and Text

Unlike the criticism that followed in the wake of the 1966 conference, which associates author-centered approaches with a discredited historicism, Girard places great emphasis on the figure of the author, rejecting both the formalist reduction that separates the author from his or her work and the overestimation of the author in literary history. For Girard, it is not a matter of reconstructing the author's intention as the key to the work, but of reading the work as a key to the intentional structures. Girard almost never comments on this or that aspect of a particular work, or on a work in isolation. More interested in the arc of an author's thinking as it evolves over time than in the particularities of a given text, Girard will often read the later works of an author as the interpretative key to the earlier works.[14] For example, in his essay on Victor Hugo, "Monsters and Demigods in Hugo" (included in this volume), Girard will treat a late work of the author, *The Man Who Laughs*, as emblematic of a contradiction that is present in Hugo's work from the beginning, thereby revealing its true orientation. Girard notes that Hugo's lifelong obsession with monsters and disfigured beings reveals a relation of identification which, when interpreted systematically, is really an identification with Satan. Hugo casts himself in the role of Satan when he realizes he cannot be God. Girard writes: "Hugo does not admit it to himself, but he always tends toward divinizing Satan." In divinizing Satan, Hugo divinizes himself, thereby revealing the dialectical sleight of hand. Hugo remains blind to this operation, which is inscribed in his constant inversion of elementary images: darkness is exalted in terms of light; physical monstrosity is redeemed by moral beauty.

The proximity that Girard sees between the author and his fictional hero is of a different order than that conceived by literary history. For Girard, the relationship is symbiotic and existential. The fictional hero is an

extension of the psychic reality of the author, a kind of alter ego which can have a causal impact on the author him- or herself, usually as an image of the author's bad faith. As Girard observes in "Marcel Proust" (included in this volume): "The book made the author no less than the author made the book." Hence Girard's contention that in the greatest authors the act of writing itself leads to a self-revelation or *conversion.*

In the conclusion to *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard describes what he calls "novelistic conversion": moments of disillusion in which the protagonist, in league with the author, realizes the futility of his mimetic pursuits and renounces the world in some way. Girard sees this motif recurring at the end of novels such as Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, and, most paradigmatically, Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past.* It is possible to read Proust's great novel as a sort of allegory of novelistic conversion. The last installment in the series, *Time Recaptured,* reveals the truth of the work from the perspective of its denouement, which is both the denouement of the author's existence as well as the denouement of the novel. This double denouement is a classic example of the feedback loop between author and work that Girard considers essential to the creative process. In his essay "Conversion in Literature and Christianity" (included in this volume), Girard writes:

> Thus, we have two perspectives in Proust and other great novels of novelistic conversion. The first perspective is the deceptive perspective of desire, which is full of illusions regarding the possibility of the hero to fulfill himself through desire. It is the perspective that imprisoned him in a sterile process of jumping from one frustrated desire to the next over a period of many years. [. . .] The second perspective is one that comes from the end of the novel, from the omega point of conversion, which is a liberation from desire. This perspective enables the novelist to rectify the illusions of the hero and provides him with the creative energy he needs to write his novel.

In other words, the creative process allows the author to discover his own bad faith or self-deception from the perspective of desire. Without the experience of self-deception no conversion is possible, and without a conversion there is no liberation from self-deception. Of course, to be self-deceived concerning the nature of one's desire is already a higher form of consciousness—quite distinct from mere naïveté or simple deception—since in self-deception there is always the implicit recognition of a truth.[15]

Not all literary conversions are novelistic. In his formidable essay on Racine ("Racine, Poet of Glory," included in this volume), Girard interprets *Phèdre*, Racine's last worldly drama before turning toward religious subjects, as a work of conversion. In his heroine, Racine uncovers the full truth of the dialectic of glory—that desire enslaves power—of which his earlier dramas offered only a vague and incomplete idea. Racine's intuitions with regard to non-reciprocal desire, a hallmark of his oeuvre, receive their full measure of understanding only in *Phèdre*, whose revelations place Racine before a spiritual choice.

The religious connotations of the term "conversion" are important to Girard's thinking. Though Girard is not suggesting that literary conversion is a form of religious experience, he does want to imply that this type of conversion represents an opening to religion, for the path that leads from literature to Christianity is one that has great historical resonance—Saint Augustine being the first and most spectacular example. Ultimately, literary conversion is the recognition of the failure of desire—the failure of self-fulfillment through desire, which is at the root of modern individualism and the consumer society—and as such it constitutes a renunciation of the world.

Text and Interpretation

In the late 1970s and 1980s, with the ascendancy of Derrida and Foucault, Girard sought to distance himself from the development of "theory" in literary studies, thus reversing his initial enthusiasm for the critical avant-garde in the late 1960s. This shift in perspective is chronicled in detail in his essay "Theory and Its Terrors" (included in this volume).

Though generally considered at odds with one another, mimetic theory and deconstruction nevertheless have points in common, and the relationship between Girard and Derrida has been explored in depth.[16] In some ways, Girard's hermeneutic stance is not unlike that of deconstruction. They both refuse the transcendental authority of the author, and they both reject abstract theorizing, preferring to develop their insights through the careful reading of texts. Both overturn the priority granted to "critical" or "theoretical" writing. And both seek to subvert conventional readings, exposing presuppositions of which we were previously unaware. Where

they part company is in their attitude toward the signified or the referent. Deconstruction asserts the autonomy of the text—the free play of the signifier—thereby cutting it off from the referent-signified, which is seen as being produced (rather than reflected) by the text. This is a restatement, with different metaphors, of Heidegger's dictum "Language is the house of being," which is to say, there is no such thing as meaning corresponding to something like reality, and therefore everything can be seen—and read—as a "text." In Derrida's words, "There is no outside to the text" (*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*).[17] The written text is liberated from reference and thus from truth, since any putative "referent" is always already a text.

Girard sees deconstruction, like structuralism, as a variant of New Criticism—that is, as a formalism, an evacuation of content in favor of linguistic play. In "Theory and Its Terrors," Girard observes: "Saussurian linguistics became a means to confirm and reinforce the expulsion of 'content.' The 'signifier' corresponds to 'form,' the hierarchically inferior 'signified' becomes the new word for 'content,' and the despised 'referent' the new word for reality." Girard reproves formalist exclusivity for its implicit nihilism, arguing for a return to content, a return to historical, social, and psychical meaning. This is not to say, however, that Girard has not found certain thinkers in this tradition compelling. Girard professed great admiration for Derrida's early essays, and in particular for "Plato's Pharmacy." However, as much as he found Derrida's thought stimulating and necessary, he considered subsequent developments unhealthy and counterproductive. The liberation of literary studies, of which Girard himself had been an ardent advocate in the late 1960s, had come at the price of a new servitude.[18]

While deconstruction explodes the subject-object dichotomy by subsuming it into language—a language without "subjects," properly speaking—Girard deconstructs subjectivity through the dialectic of desire, the dialectic between Self and Other. From a certain point of view, a Girardian reading of a text can be considered more radical than a deconstructive reading, for the deconstructive approach ultimately takes the text at face value. It cannot accuse the author of bad faith, because it considers meaning to be immanent. Though Girard puts into question the regulative value of authorial intention, he nevertheless does not separate the author from his or her text. Texts can be read against their authors, just as they can be read against themselves.

Like Derrida's deconstructive readings, Girard's approach has appeared to some as inimical to the aesthetic aspirations of literature. However, Girard is not at all opposed to rhetorical or stylistic analysis, as evidenced by his examination of metaphor in his article on Racine (mentioned above) and of oxymora in "Love and Hate in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*" and "The Passionate Oxymoron in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*" (both included in this volume). But in Girard, such analyses are always calibrated to discover the real-world significance behind what appear to be merely "poetic" or "literary" devices.

If one takes a longer view, one can see Girard as harking back to the earliest examples of literary criticism—ancient poetics and rhetoric—in which the anthropological and cultural resonances of the verbal arts were always part and parcel of "literary" analysis.[19] Plato's denunciation of mimesis in the *Republic* connects poetic creation with an analysis of human nature. Aristotle's notion of *katharsis* does not denote a merely "aesthetic" condition, but relates to psychology, religion, and medicine.[20] Longinus's fragment on sublimity (*hypsos*) is as much a treatise on human finality as it is a manual on "rhetoric," strictly speaking. In the broadest sense, then, classical aesthetics was inextricable from anthropological concerns, and no one exemplifies this classical approach better in a modern context than does René Girard.

The attempt to poeticize philosophy in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida represents a desire to return to the primordial (pre-Socratic) unity between the will to know and the will to create. Girard finds this unity in literature itself. Girard sees the uniqueness of literature in its ability to reconcile universality and particularity in ways that philosophy cannot easily match. As modes of discourse concerned primarily with the human passions, literature and myth are able to offer man perhaps the only truth man can offer himself: a truth that is specifically human. Thus, for Girard it is not a matter of bowing before an a-temporal, non-human reality, but, on the contrary, it is one of grasping human reality through its most pertinent representations, which are in most cases literary, mythical, or religious.

Hence, Girard does not see literary intuition or religious anthropology as cumulative in the sense of the positive sciences. Nor does Girard see the dialectical movement of history as evidence of a vain attachment to outmoded forms of thought. To a historical relativism gone awry, Girard

counterposes a perennial wisdom that slowly makes itself known. It is a matter of following the dramatic unfolding of the human adventure in terms of mimetic structures—always changing, always remaining in some sense the same. It is possible that we may be regressing in terms of our understanding of our world, as increasing specialization erects barriers to thought and as cultural leveling extends even to the elites. But Girard holds out hope that the university will continue to provide access to the great texts of all cultures—a true *universalism*—without losing the specificity of the Western tradition grounded in its Greco-Judeo-Christian heritage.