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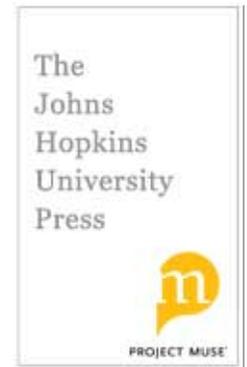
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*Mimesis and Theory: Essays on Literature and Criticism,*  
1953-2005 by Rene Girard (review)

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Although Gribben claims that he is not surveying “an identifiable genre,” such a statement is belied by his continual use of the word “genre” throughout the study and his persistent recourse to the enduring tropes and recurring motifs that appear in the fiction (21). One wishes for an additional taxonomic chapter that would provide a structural comparison of various tropes such as the journalist protagonist, the ambivalent responses to technology and capitalism, and the rapture from the perspective of those left behind on an airplane—to name just a few.

Nonetheless, such minor flaws fail to detract substantially from Gribben’s skillful analysis, lucid prose, and thought-provoking perspectives, especially regarding the intersections between popular fiction, theology, and political activism in the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. The controversial claims of prophecy novelists have often involved such virulent views as racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Catholicism, but the most recent examples of the genre espouse isolationist tendencies along with a resacralization of violence—what Gribben calls the “culting of dispensationalism”—that bears a resemblance to the Branch Davidians (164). *Left Behind* may have entered the American cultural mainstream, but some of its adherents may wish to leave the cultural mainstream behind—as evidenced by the increasingly widespread trend of home-schooling in conservative Christian circles, a trend which deserves an intensive sociological study and an evaluation of the commonly used curriculum created by Bob Jones University. Gribben’s work also opens further avenues for investigating the correlation between an escapist mentality and the Protestant penchant for epic fantasy fiction, which forms a sharp contrast with the incarnational and sacramental fiction of Catholic authors such as Graham Greene and Shusaku Endo. Having laid a solid foundation for future scholarship, Gribben’s study offers an engaging cultural critique that will appeal to Christian and non-Christian readers alike as it implicitly offers a cautionary narrative regarding the sensationalizing of dispensationalism.

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***Mimesis and Theory: Essays on Literature and Criticism, 1953-2005.*** By René Girard. Edited by Robert Doran. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-8047-5580-1. Pp. xi + 310. \$50.00

René Girard’s work in mimetic theory has found its way into various disciplines—literary studies, anthropology, psychology, theology, and religious studies—no doubt because of the remarkable revelatory power his mimetic theory and scapegoat mechanism have provided for scholars. Because his work on violence and the scapegoat mechanism has found its clearest voice and has produced much fruit in religious studies, it is easy to forget where the “discovery” of mimetic theory

began for Girard—with his study of literature. One can forget just how good Girard is as a reader of the literary text. By offering us twenty of Girard's uncollected essays (six of which are translated by Doran for the first time in English), Robert Doran brings us back to the beginning, as it were, of Girard's work on mimetic theory. Doran's translations are excellent, demonstrating his depth and breadth of knowledge of Girard's writing (both in French and in translation). His taut, succinct introduction to the essays is splendid, smart, and one of the best short summations of Girard's work I have read. In brief sections in the introduction ("Mimesis and Psychoanalysis," "Author and Text," "Text and Interpretation"), Doran introduces the reader to what is at stake in Girard's thought, offering us both the historical backdrop and the intellectual arguments in play.

The jacket blurb by Tzvetan Todorov best sums up Girard's key insight with regard to the relationship between literature and literary criticism: "In contrast to the majority of recent and contemporary theoreticians of literature, René Girard shows that the literary work refers to the world and even reveals its truth—often better than science or philosophy." At his best, and perhaps most contrarian, Girard attempts to demonstrate that literature constantly undertakes a reading of the critics of literature, that literature is perhaps always one step ahead of the critic. The essays are presented in chronological order by date of publication and are themselves of two sorts. There are essays which concern themselves with literary studies as a discipline: "Formalism and Structuralism in Literature in the Human Sciences;" "Critical Reflections on Literary Studies;" "Theory and Its Terrors;" "Innovation and Repetition;" "Conversion in Literature and Christianity." There are essays which concern themselves primarily with close textual analyses, and Girard's thoughts about literary studies as a discipline are interwoven throughout these readings as well: "History in Saint-John Perse;" "Valéry and Stendahl;" "Classicism and Voltaire's Historiography" (one gets a palpable sense of Girard's training as a historian in these first three essays); "Pride and Passion in the Contemporary Novel;" "Stendahl and Tocqueville;" "Memoirs of a Dutiful Existentialist: Simone de Beauvoir;" "Marcel Proust;" "Marivaudage, Hypocrisy, and Bad Faith;" "Racine, Poet of Glory;" "Monsters and Demigods in Hugo;" "Bastards and the Antihero in Sartre;" "Narcissism: The Freudian Myth Demythified by Proust;" "Love and Hate in Chrétien de Troyes' *Yvain*;" "Mimetic Desire in the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky;" "The Passionate Oxymoron in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*."

Though some of the essays on literary criticism may seem dated at first—a reminder of the various "theory wars" of the 1980s and 90s—Girard's insights ought to remain fresh for literary critics, for Girard signals to us again and again in each of his essays that literature itself offers us a way out of the various "fashions" of literary theory. There is a frenzied mimetic desire, Girard argues, within the academy to produce something "fashionable" and perhaps even marketable (one of his criticisms of the "publish or perish" environment of the modern academy); we must constantly be producing something cutting edge, putting to waste the old

school of literary studies (whatever that fashionable school may be at the time) to make room for the “new.”

Girard’s critique of deconstruction in “Theory and Its Terrors,” for example, offers us nothing “new” today (the essay was written in 1989). He argues that Derrida, following Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, insists “that we can and must undermine all philosophical systems, with the help of structural linguistics. But he [Derrida] goes on to argue that the reverse is also true: we must undermine any scheme that would base itself on structural linguistics, with the help of philosophical language and philosophical texts. The truth is that there is no truth in any text, except perhaps for the truth of an absence of truth, and even that is not quite certain” (199). Twenty years later, Girard’s criticism here seems rather commonplace. And perhaps, as all good literary theorists, we should find a “new” way to counter the various claims of literary theory. And yet this “new” way stands at the crux of all of Girard’s work: he advocates a return to the masterpieces of literature and argues “that the most perspicacious texts from the standpoint of human relations are the great texts of Western literature.... Literature is the repository of all great texts that exist outside of fashion” (212-213); ultimately, he argues, criticism has everything to learn from literature and not the other way around.

In his other works (*Deceit, Desire and the Novel* [1961] and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* [1978], for example), Girard has always maintained that his mimetic theory is not his own, that he did not invent it or systematize it; he merely read the great masters—Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and Proust—and learned about the mimetic desire from their literary creations. We witness this argument taken up specifically and demonstrated with painstaking detail in his brilliant essay, “Narcissism: The Freudian Myth Demythified by Proust.” Girard makes it clear that his intention is simply “to facilitate a dialogue between the two, a dialogue of equals” (191), a critical gesture abandoned by most literary critics. According to Girard, narcissism as conceived by Freud (as espoused in Freud’s *On Narcissism: An Introduction*) “is the condition of a subject who prefers never to get out of himself, even when he appears to do so” (175), the narcissist treating himself as his own object of sexual attraction even when he appears to direct his desire toward other objects. Girard places Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* alongside Freud’s understanding of narcissism and observes Proust’s response to Freud’s understanding of desire: “To say that no one is a narcissist for oneself and that everyone wants to be one, is to say that the self does not exist in the substantial sense that Freud gives to the term in *Narcissism*. But everybody is trying to acquire such a substantial self; everybody believes, more or less as Freud does, in the existence of the substantial self” (182). Girard argues throughout that Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* has already staged a Freudian (mis)reading; Proust attempts to demonstrate that the Freudian reading is really a crippling lie, a stumbling block. In short, Girard places Proust’s mimetic desire up against Freud’s object desire and shows the way in which the former already anticipates and critiques the latter.

Girard offers the reader a similar sort of analysis in yet another captivatingly keen essay, “Bastards and Antihero in Sartre,” except here he pits Sartre against himself, the Sartre of *The Words* versus the Sartre of *Nausea*, *The Flies*, and *Being and Nothingness*. Girard’s project in this chapter is to answer Sartre with Sartre: “What is new and invaluable in *The Words* is the concretely realized—though never made explicit—fusion between the Oedipal theme, the theme of the Other, and the ‘project of being god’” (139). Girard argues that we can witness Sartre both revealing and concealing Sartre from his reader—though the concealment, for Girard, leads to an even greater revelation. We see the great autonomous antihero Sartre revealing something of the idolatrous Sartre, the man who very much imitates and is bound to his grandfather. The more Sartre desires a radical autonomy, the more he becomes identical to his grandfather. The man who wishes to be the freest, it turns out in Girard’s analysis, is the man who is most bound by a mimetic inter-subjective relationship, a relationship, no matter how hard he try, from which he cannot disentangle himself (for an absolutely stinging critique of such self-blindness/delusion, one must read Girard’s essay “Memoirs of a Dutiful Existentialist: Simone de Beauvoir” in this collection; Girard’s analysis can be both playful and sharp, and often both simultaneously).

Girard also offers us readings of literary texts without explicitly focusing on the ongoing battles of literary criticism (though his criticism of literary studies is often on the periphery). He offers the reader wonderful insights into Hugo, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, and de Troyes. All of his readings, of course, are predicated upon mimetic theory, but the reader need not know all of the intricacies of the theory before reading these texts. In fact, these essays that focus primarily on the text itself can act as a wonderful primer on mimetic theory—assuming the reader is familiar with the texts Girard analyzes. And here I must address the one criticism that has dogged Girard throughout his career: it appears that his readings of these texts is “reductionist,” that he finds imitative desire in every text he reads. To this criticism, I offer Girard’s own defense: “its critics are right; it is reductionist with a vengeance ... Exacerbated mimetic desire is not about the richness of life, to be sure, but about the same impoverishment Dostoevsky is talking about ... Mimetic desire and the obstacle/model obsession finally enable us, I believe, to formulate rigorously the law of this self-impoverishment when it is realistically portrayed, as it is in Dostoevsky” (254).

Even if one is comfortable with this premise that mimetic desire is reductionist, and even if one finds mimetic desire a valuable tool for literary studies (and by the end of the book many readers may not be convinced, as this collection is not intended to be an apology for mimetic theory), one should still come prepared to challenge many of Girard’s particular readings of texts. As with all critics, he can isolate (or leave out) certain details within a text that push his mimetic reading in a certain direction, whereas focusing on other details, even while working with the mimetic insight, may lead him to a radically different reading of any given text.

So, for example, in his reading of *Notes from Underground*, Girard highlights the Underground Man's mimetic rivalry with the officer who "unceremoniously" moves him aside as opposed to throwing the Underground Man through a window as he had fantasized (a desire discovered in the various romantic novels he reads). I agree that the officer acts now as a model and obstacle, yet one will miss crucial aspects of this underground tragedy if one moves too quickly away from the Underground Man's primary model—books. In other words, the Underground Man's initial attraction to the officer is already mediated, and books, these external models in Girardian parlance, stand as the foundation to understanding imitation in Part II of *Notes*—a fact about which the narrator takes pains to make us aware. I offer this instance not as a critique of Girard's particular reading here, but simply as an example of the strength of mimetic theory—that while it is admittedly reductionist, it also offers a plentitude of readings in its "system."

Robert Doran has done a great service to literary studies by giving us this collection of essays. For those familiar with Girard's work, the essays will provide a fascinating historical view of the trajectory of his thought. For those unfamiliar with Girard's work, I believe some essays in this collection could prove to be difficult; however, because of Doran's elegant introduction and because Girard deals with the same issues time and again in the various literary texts, I believe the patient reader will be offered a solid introduction to mimetic theory and literary study.

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***To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World.*** By James Davison Hunter. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0199730803. Pp. 368. \$27.95.

The work of James Davison Hunter, as a sociologist of religion and culture, has not been made use of very often by literary scholars. His 1991 book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* played a large role in defining the terrain of American political analysis in terms of deep, morally-based partisan struggle, and the "culture war" metaphor has become ubiquitous in the two decades since. Still, there was little either in that book, or in his other studies of American evangelicalism and moral education, that was of immediate use to literary critics. That may begin to change, especially for scholars interested in Christianity and literature, with the publication of his latest book, *To Change the World*. In it, Hunter offers a sweeping, detailed analysis of the state of American Christianity and its relationship to power within the framework of a compelling sketch of social theory. And while he doesn't say much in the book about the literary field directly, his argument for altering