

COV&R 2023 Paris

Panel 'Religion, madness and mimetic theory',

Text of a lecture (Saturday, 17 June 2023) during the Colloquium on Violence and Religion (COV&R) in Paris, in the panel 'Religion, madness and mimetic theory'.

A reprise of the entire panel (24 August 2023, De Balie in Amsterdam) can be viewed on the COV&R youtube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LPdxxCjp8Vo>

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A patchwork of non-integrated others

It has been a long time since I first presented a paper at a COV&R conference, in 1994 in Wiesbaden, entitled 'Neck riddles in mimetic theory.' It discusses riddle stories in which a man sentenced to death saves his life by propounding the judge a riddle which he cannot possibly guess or find by wit, because it is based on bizarre experiences, unique to the condemned person. Somewhat similar to what I did in my lecture, because I hid the fact that my research, which I would later get my doctorate on, was inspired by the eccentric experiences from psychoses that overtook me between 1979 and 1983 and landed me in a psychiatric hospital. Moreover, the motif of a condemned person saving his life is related to the experiences of my father who spent weeks on death row at Buchenwald concentration camp during World War II – and miraculously escaped death. As the eldest in the family, I was definitely 'the boy who had to make everything right.'

I am convinced that a lot of research is related to a researcher's own experiences. Our *maître à penser*, René Girard, tells this in his book *Quand ces choses commenceront*, published just before that Wiesbaden conference, to Michel Treguer when he reflects on the last chapter of *Mensonge romantique*: 'You're right, of course, about there being a personal experience behind what I say.' [] I ended up understanding that I was going through an experience of the kind that I was describing.' In his overview of Girard's work Wolfgang Palaver wrote, 'He began to turn away from his own pride and to see himself as a puppet of his own mimetic desire.' Girard adds a *caveat* in 1994: there is the danger of narcissism. I also experience that today when I do not stick to the theory, but try to clarify parts of my life story from the moment I started reading Girard's *Des choses caches depuis la fondation du monde*, which offered me a new opening to my Christian background. It stimulated me to start learning Hebrew to investigate its roots.

My *learning* still continues, in a study group: what Jews do in a *beth ha-midrash*. The Torah is too great to be owned by any of us, so the mimetic rivalry that is always there, becomes a fruitful mimesis. - *Lernen* leads to freedom. The last ten years we have been studying the book of Exodus, with midrashim from the long rabbinic tradition. It's a book of liberation, that finally gave me the courage to write about that profound period in the psychiatric hospital.

From the third part of *Des choses cachées*, I learned a lot about interdividuality, and also from J.-M Oughourlian's *Mimetic Brain* in which he distinguishes between the rational, emotional and mimetic brain. And from Henri Grivois, who published on incipient psychosis.' Initially I steered toward a kind of psycho-philosophical self-analysis using insights from mimetic theory. However, in the end I decided: it will not be a scientific treatise, but a novel.

For several reasons:

(1) I learned from *Mensonge romantique* that real knowledge can be conveyed very well through a novel.

(2) Hungarian writer and Nobel Prize winner Imre Kertész, explaining why he was unable to describe his real life concentration camp experiences, gave me the freedom to paradoxically tell the 'real story' in fiction.

(3) I could by no means always remember exactly what had happened, and therefore had to resort to fiction, even though I had preserved material from those years.

(4) People in my immediate surroundings I wanted to make unrecognizable by literary means. The American writer David Vann once said (according to a Dutch writer), 'You must sacrifice your family on the altar of fiction.' I didn't want that, especially with regard to my mother.

(5) Finally, I was inspired by a Jewish sage from the 18th C in Lithuania (the *maggid* of Dubno).

He explains why the truth of the Torah is not presented as a philosophy or code of law but in stories and parables:

"Truth was walking about town but everyone was scared to look at him. Wherever he went, people screamed and ran away because he was completely naked! Along came his friend named Story who told Truth that if he wanted to be accepted, he would offer him a suit of clothing. That is what happened. Story gave Truth a suit so people would be more comfortable in his presence."

My novel, *Hanesteen*, was not published in Dutch until forty years after my hospitalization. In 2020, after my working life. Is that a long time? Recently

in Jerusalem I met a woman who works in trauma counseling. She said: 'Forty years is normal' before people gain sight of what happened to them.

Hanesteen, in English literally 'Cock's stone,' the Latin equivalent is Alectorius, the name of my alter ego, with which I dared to dive into my psychoses again, to describe the four years in the institution, to look back on what preceded and to interpret the 'reconversion' that ensued. That conversion - by origin I am Roman Catholic, but by 1970 I had become an 'avowed atheist' for ten years - was able to take place partly because of Girard's insights into what the holy actually means. But also because I started to realize how important faith had been to my father in the concentration camp, where secret Eucharistic celebrations took place with a priest consecrating crumbs of bread - it helped him survive. On death row where he awaited execution, he had prayed passionately. Martin Luther said, 'The word God is something that comes to mind when you are no longer making it. The real God is that of the victims.'

Since the publication of my book I have been lecturing about it regularly, but I always have to overcome diffidence when my underlying experiences are discussed. It's easier to talk about physical illnesses; with psychoses you quickly see frowned eyebrows - subtle scapegoating. In that sense, my novel was also a 'coming out.'

Back to *Des choses cachées*: I discovered it in September 1981 at a French bookstore in Amsterdam, on a Saturday I was allowed to return to my apartment in the city for a weekend from the psychiatric hospital near the coast. Immediately I was struck by Oughourlian's question on the first page, about 'the problem of desire' to Girard's thesis that 'that only the religious will yield the secret of man.' A revelation! Which resonated with experiences during my first psychosis, in 1979, that arose when I worked as a sociolinguist at the Free University and read Louis Althusser about ideological state apparatuses. This hardened communist brought up a Bible passage in which Moses figured. Could that be, as an intellectual in the twentieth century, religion was *passé*, wasn't it? Had not Catholicism shackled me in a calcified morality and had I not been liberated by, for instance *in sexualibus*, ignoring all prohibitions? I had been an altar boy in church - but a Bible? In addition, in the Netherlands religion was then (and now) hardly taken seriously by intellectuals. But I looked up the passage in Exodus in which Moses stands before the burning bush. It made me giddy: as if I were reading along with Moses those ideological state apparatuses instead of the other way around. It was *this* reversal that impressed me two years later in *Des choses cachées*: 'The religious will yield the secret of man.'

At the asylum, I retreated to the dormitory between therapies to read *Des choses cachées* with red ears, flying back and forth between passages on mimesis and rivalry, about the scapegoat mechanism, its concealment in myths and rites, the Judeo-Christian scriptures and the structure of psychosis. It seemed like this book was written especially for me! I immediately applied the passages about victimhood and holy kingship to my therapy group and to what my father was telling me: that I shouldn't think, I could hold an audience in the madhouse like a royal.

It is well known from mimetic literature that psychotics lose their 'self' and identify with others, that there is a 'desire to be like another.' Who had been my models?

Halfway through my studies in somewhat dull Leiden and after a failed relationship, I yearned for the freedom of worldly Amsterdam in the 1970s, where a sister of mine led a free-spirited life. I also wanted to imitate others there, I later understood from Girard: idols they became. In my novel, I wrote that Alektorius was 'a patchwork of non-integrated others.' After my discharge from the hospital I read in Girard's *Bouc émissaire* about the demons of Gerasa (Marc. 5) and was able to draw a parallel with the 'Legion' that dwelt within me. To a large extent, my recovery then consisted of relating my bizarre experiences to the mystical texts of the prophets and the curious interpretations of rabbis, who, like psychotics, 'hear' many words differently. For example, Ex. 32: 16 says, 'The tablets were the work of God and the writing was the writing of God, inscribed on the tablets' - do not read 'inscribed' *charut* they say, but *cherut* 'freedom,' for only *he* will turn out to be a free man who engages in the study of the Torah (*M. Abot* VI, 2).

As I said, my incipient psychosis started in September 1979, in the night before I had to give a sociolinguistics lecture at the Free University. The tension in my life - both private and professional - had been running high. Suddenly it seemed superfluous to me to prepare that lecture, for I had meanwhile become the archangel after whom I am named, Michael - I could lecture offhand. Elated, I wandered around the city, did not sleep and returned by morning to put on white clothes and shoes. When I arrived at the University, colleagues looked at me with strange eyes, but I could still talk normally. In the lecture hall, I spoke 'like an angel', stood on a bench and began to violently gesticulate against the prevailing university culture,

in which students didn't learn anything that really mattered. They loved that at first, laughing, but when I started cursing and ranting, some left the lecture hall. In the evening, a friend came to visit who understood my condition, and with her husband she took me to a crisis center. That's how it started.

After a few months in a clinic in Amsterdam, I opted for a therapeutic community in a psychiatric hospital near the dunes. A Protestant institution, where in the main building there was a stone plaque that read 'Jesus healed all who were sick, to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah, "He took our illnesses from us and carried away our diseases"' (Mat. 8, 16-17).

Although at first I was at a loss for all religion in my delusions, I had asked the pastor of the hospital: 'Can we have a group here where we study Bible texts?' That worked, but when he started the first meeting with a prayer, I was annoyed. - Prayer? I just wanted to study if the Bible was for me! And then I discovered Girard's work in 1981, which accelerated my reawakened interest in religion, although even after that I had to spend several episodes of psychosis in an isolation cell, where I panicked and started praying again. Over the years, I learned to 'inscribe' my psychotic experiences into the larger story of the Jewish and Christian traditions. I recognized the rivalries within the families in Genesis, identified with Moses in his vision by the burning bush, experienced the liberation of the Israelites from the house of slavery. The visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel became less strange, just as Jesus when he is tempted by the devil on the pinnacle of the temple (Luc. 4), or when he says to Nicodemus (John 3), "You must be born again." As a psychotic I had died, lay among the corpses in a concentration camp, and caught something of Ezekiel 37, where the Lord says: 'Dry bones [] I'm going to put breath into you, and you will live.' Girard's interpretation of the biblical Job, who found himself outside society, gave points of recognition; also Jeremiah 20: 7 'All day long I have been made a laughing-stock,' which I experienced in the therapeutic community - also reflected in my novel. And surely the psalms, 'I am a stranger here on earth' (119: 19) 'Out of the depths I cry to you. (130)'. St. Paul mentions the encouraging foolishness of this world and God's wisdom (1 Cor.). And Henri Nouwen's interpretation of *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, with the varying identifications of the main characters impressed me a lot. - This is how I came back to tradition and my still turbulent moods can find peace in church on Sundays.

In my novel I have described many events in such a way that they can easily be understood by people who know the Bible, as stages in a conversion

story, although there was also someone who said to me, 'Religion in your book? Well, that didn't bother me at all.' I grafted my final near-psychosis in the novel into a kind of *noche oscura* (John of the Cross) or *nuit de feu* (Blaise Pascal), like Jacob's struggle at the Jabbok with 'the angel' (Gen. 32).

Then there is a happy ending, where the hero finds his princess - which corresponds to reality. I am daily grateful that I have not had to take psychopharmaceuticals for 35 years. And as for my attitude in the 1970s, I can only say what I put in Alectorius' mouth with Jeremiah 20:7: 'You have outwitted me and prevailed.'

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