

GIRARD AND THE RETELLING OF HUMAN TIME: MIMESIS OR THE MESSIANIC

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Emmanuel Levinas' momentous opening words in the preface to *Totality and Infinity* make it plain that violence, including its recent gross manifestation in the 2nd World War, form the urgent context for the development of his ethical philosophy of the other. The fundamental role of *being* in these remarks, and reference to Heraclitus, also make it impossible not to glimpse behind his shoulder the specter of Heidegger, a philosopher embedded in the history of violence, whom Levinas is setting out radically to resist. "We do not need obscure fragments of Heraclitus to prove to us that violence reveals itself as war to philosophical thought, that war does not only affect it as the most patent fact, but as the very patency, or *the truth*, of the real. In war reality rends the words and images that dissimulate it . . . (W)ar is produced as *the pure experience of pure being*. The ontological event that takes form in this black light is a casting into movement of beings hitherto anchored in their identity, a mobilization of absolutes, by an objective order from which there is no escape . . . War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the same."¹ War (as *being!*) destroys the coherence of the world, of the same, at the same moment as it blots out the face of the other. In Girardian terms it is the dissolution of sacred order which seeks only to restore itself in a new hecatomb of victims.

What then is capable of interrupting this black light, of war and violence, which acts as a constant backdrop to human history and threatens in the 20th and 21st centuries to cancel it completely, and yet, at least here, is the very experience of *being* itself? In this question lurks all the drama both of Levinas' ethical endeavor and the profound challenge of Rene Girard's anthropology. What is named under the title of the *messianic* offers itself as an answer to the question, especially if and as we see a convergence between the thought of these two thinkers. The nature of time itself is at stake. To whom or what does time belong? What is the final meaning, reckoning, or term of time?

Benoit Chantre's recent book, *The Time is Short*, gives huge impetus to the temporal-messianic question in Girard.² As we know, Chantre was Girard's key conversation partner in the last phases of his career, and Chantre shows it is the nature of contemporary time which emerges at the core of his thought. He states Girard's "fascinating and complex central thesis" as the following: "It is in the disruption of ancient mechanisms for containing violence, in their essential exhaustion, that the true face of man and the true face of God conjointly appear."³ We are fully in the midst of those disruptions, and Girardians regularly turn to mimetic theory to describe them. What has not perhaps been so clear is the claim that precisely in these historical circumstances there is emergence of something different and new. Thus, the contemporary moment is one of profound transformation, a messianic moment, and Chantre goes on to say this explicitly. Our present situation belongs to "the gradual rise of messianic transcendence at the

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity, an Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University: Pittsburg PA, 1969), 21, my italics.

² Benoît Chantre, *The Time Has Grown Short: René Girard, or the Last Law* (Michigan State University, 2022)

³ Benoît Chantre, *The Time Has Grown Short: René Girard, or the Last Law*, xi

heart of world history.” a “horizontal . . . transcendence that comes . . . in the wake of catastrophe”.⁴

Here, in the Girardian conversation then, there is a decisive shift toward time, its character, its possibility, and its responsibility. It no longer seems enough to repeat the endless cycle of mimetic crisis, or the thought of some terminal, extreme explosion that might bring it all to its fatal end. Time instead becomes an emergence, the event of something new and true, the name for which is the messianic. But it is necessary also to assert this, to name it. The very character of the messianic is that it needs to be signified, brought into effective presence as meaning and sign. The messianic works not by clamorous appearance, which is the realm of being and violence, but by the trace, by the name, by the future itself introduced into and by transformative language. I am suggesting that this pro-active creative activity is as much the intellectual responsibility of the heirs of Girard as is the rehearsal of the mimetic analytic. To unpack this, it is helpful to turn more thoroughly to the thought of Levinas.

Levinas makes a strategic distinction between the other and “totality,” the sum total of what is revealed in being. In contrast “Transcendence is passing over to being’s *other*, otherwise than being.”⁵ Transcendence is the other person, the one who cannot be held in the totality, and above all as ethical demand. As is well known Levinas displaces Heidegger’s death of Dasein as the possibility which constitutes human time and the “totality” of being with it. Instead, it is the death of the other which radically concerns me, and my death becomes secondary to that. “In the guiltiness of the survivor, the death of the other [*l’autre*] is my affair. *My* death is my *part* in the death of the other, and in my death I die the death that is my fault.”⁶ Such dramatic, shocking reversals alter the meaning of time itself. Because time in fact is “the turning of the Same toward the Other,”⁷ and because the face of the Other says thou shalt not kill,⁸ time bends ineluctably toward the Other as prohibition against killing. Time then becomes positively the human possibility of nonviolence. This I would take to be the sense of the following, where “infinity” is the face of the other: “Time would be a manner of deferring to infinity while never being able to contain or comprehend it [violently].”⁹ Time opens up as the imperative and destiny of nonviolence separating itself out progressively and endlessly from the old dead fates of violence.

The genetic vigor of this thought is its eschatological background, something which Levinas states explicitly in *Totality and Infinity*, without mentioning its biblical antecedents. “The eschatological vision . . . does not envision the end of history within being understood as a totality, but institutes a relation with the infinity of being which exceeds the totality.”¹⁰ In other words, there is an in-breaking in thought that comes from outside the realm of being as presently

⁴ Benoît Chantre, *The Time Has Grown Short: René Girard, or the Last Law*, 21

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 3

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University, 2000) 39, author’s italics.

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 111

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 106

⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 23

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23

constituted in philosophy. This is Levinas' achievement, and it assumes a powerful, indeed epochal cultural status. However, if we graft the anthropology of Girard onto these reflections they become still more urgent and insistent, for we revert at once into a *crisis of the other*, rather than their ethical infinity. In the current crisis the other is constantly reappropriated by generative violence as an attempted exercise in totality, where all there appears is the incessant angry demands of the offended, exacerbated other, rather than the revelatory transcendence of the other. To understand further we need to turn to Chantre's book, and his phases of Girard's career which explain for us this fearful contrast.

In Chantre's mapping of Girard's literary career the first book, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, revealed the impact of internal mediation/deviated transcendence which form the character of the modern. Thus, as Chantre underlines, Girard began with the modern predicament. He then tracked back to a study of the archaic (*Violence and the Sacred*); after which he introduced biblical revelation which subverts the archaic (*Things Hidden*). Finally, in *Achever Clausewitz*, he returned to the modern condition, which presents in fact as an exacerbated byproduct of the biblical subversion.¹¹ But it is the mutations of human transcendence which remain the fundamental core of Girard's thought, and from the beginning the feature of the messianic was, according to Chantre, necessarily in play—the fact of “the true face of man and the true face of God conjointly appear(ing).” At the same time, it remains true that the messianic agency is easily obscured, including among Girardians, by the frenzy of deviated transcendence which dominates our contemporary consciousness.

What Chantre shows overall is a circle of movement in Girard's thought beginning and ending in internal mediation or deviated transcendence. Here is the frantic theatre of horizontal mimesis, the endless gladiatorial games in which it is now the most exacerbated victim-other who is the crowned with the laurels. It is also the exacerbated context of enemy doubles which becomes the apocalyptic vision of geopolitical escalation in *Battling to the End*. But Chantre's argument is that it is precisely in these circumstances that the messianic is at work, both revealing the essence of violence and, simultaneously, the transcendence of the other in a mode that is not toxic or destructive. Chantre names this mediation positively and does so as “intimate mediation.”¹² The problem with this language is that it seems to enter a private area of the human self, hidden from the crisis of history. He analyzes it as a removing of God from all manifestation and possible rivalry, granting a mediation with a non-rivalrous other. But although this is a statement of nonviolence it tends to work at the level of absences, rather than something positively human and historical. To avail of something like the latter we must turn again to Levinas, and his concept of “trace.”

The trace is a specialized concept, with its own philosophical history. As Levinas states it, “The significance of the trace consists in signifying without making appear.”¹³ Levinas develops it in

¹¹ Benoît Chantre, *The Time Has Grown Short: René Girard, or the Last Law*, 19: “intimate mediation... which is none other than grace, or the irruption, at the heart of crisis, of ‘authentic’ transcendence;” also 45-9

¹² Benoît Chantre, *The Time Has Grown Short: René Girard, or the Last Law*, 65-6; but see also 67, for a sense of proximity “at the heart of history.”

¹³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 41

order to show how the other may function in a world of totality or the same, without being co-opted by it. It is clearly a linguistic device (the reason Jacques Derrida was attracted to it) attempting the possibility of a signified beyond metaphysical closure. At the same time, it manifests Levinas' own particular thought of transcendence, which is the "other," the other as trace. He says, "Only a being transcending the world . . . can leave a trace."¹⁴ Perhaps Chantre's concept of God removed from all manifestation runs parallel to this non-appearance. But in full Girardian terms—those of generative violence and the semiotics that go with it—the question becomes necessarily how does the figure of trace enter into signification without its own inevitable appearance in the order of violence and being. In strict Girardian terms, if original signification derives from the victim and the violence discharged on it, how does the "trace" escape from the founding sacred and its totality? In Girard's anthropology there is no room for a separate, pre-existing realm of transcendence and neither does this exist in Levinas' phenomenology. Thus, again, how does the trace escape being, and define a new transcendence in anything but a verbal way? *What is its relation in significance so that we can in fact speak it?*

In the case of Levinas, I think we have to posit the *de facto* transcendence of all the victims of the 20th century wars, but including especially those of the Shoah, as an exemplary case of the other as "otherwise than being." The event of the Shoah is the muffled tolling of a bell on a sightless ocean that little by little rivets our attention so we can hear and then see almost nothing else. It shows us the face of the other without any ontological force of violence on their side, an almost pure nonviolence, revealing to human mimesis the naked "other" without the power of being as force. Are we not in the presence here of a vast historical mediation of nonviolence? And, in this case, does not the thought of trace carry within it this actual mediation?

Such a reflection is reinforced by an essential reflection of Girard himself and his identification of the nonviolent logos. He tells us, "The Johannine logos is foreign to any kind of violence."¹⁵ Where would this stark conceptual clarity come from if not from the overall context of the non-retaliating victims of the Shoah which reached a parallel signification in Levinas' transcendence of the other and the trace? Or, put another way, how would Girard come to this striking certainty apart from the implicit witness of "the holocaust" in historical contrast to the Heideggerean logos? The mainline Christian theological tradition never came to this clarity before. Is it not then the vast phenomenology of victim nonviolence at the heart of the events of the 2nd World War which produced a transcendent nonviolence revelatory of the other in its own right?¹⁶ Girard's descriptions tell us that the Johannine logos can only be recognized in its being driven

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans Nidra Poller (University of Illinois Press, 2006), 43

¹⁵ René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, with Jean-Michel Oughourlian and Guy Lefort, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford University, 1987), 271

¹⁶ In an extraordinary comment Levinas himself seems to suggest as much. An interview with him given in 1985 included the question as to the contribution of Christianity to peace. His answer turns at once to the Shoah and its impact on Christianity, using language of "the Passion," implicitly twinning the experience of the Jews with this decisive trope of Christian revelation. "I . . . think the trials humanity has passed through in the course of the twentieth century are, in their horror, not only a measure of human depravity, but a renewed call back to our vocation. I have the impression that they have altered something in us. I think specifically that the Passion of Israel at Auschwitz has profoundly marked Christianity itself. . . ." (Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity & Transcendence* [Columbia University Press: New York, 1999], 181, my italics.)

out of a violent world.¹⁷ On the surface this looks like a quietist, almost passive and other-worldly characterization. But how can the Christ figure play its part in revealing the victim unless it flows back into the world as trace, and specifically the trace of nonviolence? The very being-driven-out is itself the active revelation of nonviolence. Indeed, could a more accurate phenomenological constitution of it be given apart from nonviolence? In which case we have a convergence of Levinasian otherwise-than-being and Girardian logos. Levinas could not have constructed his phenomenological ethics and Girard his biblical anthropology without this historical transcendence. Following from this, in a similar necessary correlation, the figure of the messianic can only be raised to full contemporary clarity by recognizing its inherent transcendence as nonviolence. This then is an actual mediation, present and active in history, as formative and effective in its pathway as violent mediation always asserted itself in its own. This transcendent mediation is more than simply recognizing the victim other. It is the generative mediation by which this recognition takes place, and it is to be acknowledged in its own right. It is the emergence of the messianic in our contemporary human world.

What the modern Western world worships is the triumphant nimbus of the victim without recognizing the light that surrounds it. It is only in turning to this light consciously and deliberately that the possibility of messianism can be mobilized. And, as a matter of intellectual integrity, we have to recognize that Girard could only have made his breakthroughs by virtue of this messianic light working in the luminous shadows of his writing. This is the full significance of Chantre's reflections and his "intimate mediation." What intimate means is an experience deeper than the neural pathways formed and inhabited by generative violence, but it is by no means restricted to the interior space of the individual soul. The very character of this intimacy is interindividual; it is the transcendence of the (nonviolent) other, consistent with all other forms of human mediation, to wit the human interaction which shapes the common world of people and their sense of time.

Having established a phenomenological concept of the messianic in this way, the question naturally arises as to its connection with Christian doctrine. What is the relation of a Girardian messianism to theology? The most obvious place to look for an answer is in the work of the Catholic theologian, James Alison. His *Joy of Being Wrong* remains a classic of theological hermeneutics from the basis of Girardian anthropology, and its methodology is the reconfiguring of the pattern and meaning of time. For Alison the death and resurrection of Christ warps time so profoundly it begins it completely anew, and it is only on this basis the traditional doctrine of "original sin" may be understood. "The resurrection of Jesus was not a miraculous event within a preexisting framework of the understanding of God, but the event by which God recast the possibility of human understanding of God."¹⁸ Involved in this recasting is a dramatic change in the meaning of death. Rather than Heidegger's determining impossibility (something that may also be parsed as a destiny of violence), death is now refigured exactly as possibility, one of life and forgiveness. In which case, everything that is really wrong with humanity ("original sin") is signified *from this point*, not from some putative story-book disobedience. Thus, time is recast,

¹⁷ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 271-3

¹⁸ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong* (Crossroad: New York, 1998), 115.

as meaning flowing toward us from this point. The gospel re-begins everything, so time is constantly begun anew, coming toward us from its own future. As Alison puts it in perhaps the quintessential statement of the book, “Identity is eschatological, not foundational,”¹⁹ telling us that what it means to be human comes to us from the future, not the past.

He also suggests explicitly in respect of time that, “it becomes possible to imagine a quite different structuring of the human memory, and thus of time, as one where human time and memory are able to be called (creatively suggested) into being by . . . anterior pacific mimesis.”²⁰ Without going into this in too much detail (Alison is referencing time in Hegel), what he is saying is that pacific mimesis can become anterior to me, meaning that it stands before me, in front of me, in a quite different way from the foundational past, and in this way a new temporality emerges.

Alison is probably the most messianic theologian in the English-speaking world—in the structural sense of reflecting Chantre’s “messianic transcendence at the heart of world history.” We feel the huge ship of human time moving under our feet, pointing us toward an entirely new port of destination. It would not seem right for theology occupying its own special deck on the ship to insist it was still guiding the ship to a traditional other-worldly destination outside of time. Alison’s theology shows, I think, an accurate recognition of the shift in human time and its meaning. As he insists the shift is an anthropological one belonging to human structure as such.²¹ It is impossible then that this change can be rigidly separated (as religious confession) from the broad commonwealth of human meaning. Human beings are mimetic, so how could the new human identity brought by Christ, and acting as eschatological in-breaking, be restricted from any attentive human being in history? Thus, from the theological point of view the shift in time brought by Christ leaks inevitably into broad humanity. Hence messianism. If the new identity is in the world it is possible to speak and think of it in ways that are not simply religious; but this in turn must deeply affect theology. There has to be faithful theological accounting of the broad legacy of messianism spread across and through the world by the Johannine logos.

It seems in conclusion that we are at the borders of an excitingly fresh understanding of messianism in the human world, and this is a matter of Girardian logic, as Chantre claims. It’s an understanding that needs to be brought to headline status in Girardian discussion and discourse. The messianic is not about a religious relationship—designed to bring us to an other-worldly resolution. It’s the opposite. *The messianic refers to something that must be described in terms of a structural transcendence, something that defines a way of being human, something rooted in actual humanity, and yet transformative of that humanity. I do not know of a term able to reveal that transcendence better than “nonviolence.”* Conversely, if nonviolence is understood as transcendence, then it is understood to define humanity in a way both parallel and alternative to violence, i.e. to essential, founding violence. It is a way of being, that is otherwise than violent being. The Messiah is the means by which this radically transforming transcendence breaks into

¹⁹ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 170

²⁰ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 224

²¹ James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, see the pages where he lays out the work of Christ as providing “a new universal [anthropological] foundation,” 164-5.

the world, and the latter is the very name of the messianic. Terminal violence is the other of the nonviolent other, raging to restore itself before the nudity of the human face, but by the same token the nonviolent messianic is the necessary antagonist (inescapable in history) of all the war machines of history, especially the most recent.²²

²² It is against this background that the New Testament Book of Revelation is to be understood. Its images of rampant violence only make sense in contrast to the figure of the “Lamb standing as having been slain,” invoked 28 times. These contrasting figures—the forces of violence on the one hand, the ever-present non-retaliating victim on the other—show to us simultaneously the escalation to extremes and the triumphant semiotics of nonviolence.