

Derrida, Girard and the involvement of personal life in theory

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1. Introduction

There are many touch points between the work of Jacques Derrida and René Girard. To me, as a student of literature, these two writers particularly stand out as great readers or great exegetes.¹ The way they handle and combine texts, the way they dare to break with reading conventions, has proved to be really fruitful.

Some time ago I watched a documentary about Derrida, made by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, published in 2002, carrying the simple title *Derrida*.² I found that this experimental documentary *at the same* reflected Derrida's many reservations, not to say his skepticism, as to the possibility of making portraits – *and* – proved to be far more revealing, even intimate, than a conventional documentary ever could be. This experience said to me that the many complaints about deconstruction in the sense of sterility or of being merely a game with words – complaints also made by René Girard – are to a certain degree unjust. The *Derrida* documentary is very much alive, full of biographical and referential energy. Personal life and theory are not to be kept apart in the thought of Derrida – and with this in mind I started to reread a number of his works.

In the work of René Girard we find a similar refusal to separate personal life and theory. In his work it is even more outspoken. Whereas Derrida's approach is mainly epistemological, focusing on creating images and truths, Girard explicitly, even emphatically, says that you cannot understand mimetic theory without submitting your own personal life to its insights. In this presentation I would like to further investigate the similarities in the work of Derrida and Girard limited to this topic.

Limited to this topic – I want to stress – because I am aware that there has a larger, more encompassing debate about deconstruction versus mimetic theory been going on for several decades now. A lot of interesting things have been said about the curious love- and hate relationship between these two theories, but I will try to keep this larger discussion at bay as much as I can. For the moment, let me suffice to mention Andrew McKenna's criticism with which I have to agree for most of the time. I still consider his 1992 study *Violence and Difference* a standard work on the subject.

2. The limits of reticence

It would have been very strange if the two thinkers I am concerned with in this presentation had not shown a certain readiness to disclose important fragments of their personal lives. It would have been strange because their theories do not fit in with a conventional worldview in which life and work are thought of as two separate domains. In this conventional view, philosophers reside in theoretical space while working, and migrate to personal space while retreating or relaxing from their work, a private domain which is generally closed off to outsiders. If thinkers gain renown, *if they really get famous*, they may – or they may not – open the doors to journalists, interviewers, documentary-makers, start to publish diaries, letters, confessions and give insight in areas differing from the ideas or scientific insights they express in their works.

This great divide between theory on the one hand and personal life on the other, gets to a certain extent bridged in a genre we might call *intellectual biography*. Many great intellectual biographies have been written, and often they may help us to get an insight in the formation of ideas and how they are interrelated to sometimes very personal experiences. But – however much I can enjoy the better writings in this genre – in this presentation I will not be really concerned with intellectual biography. What I would like to point out is that biography, personal life, is *implicated* on a very theoretical level in both the theoretical work of Derrida and Girard.

Derrida and Girard, both started their intellectual careers in an atmosphere of high *reticence* to the peeking curiosities of journalists and other interviewers. Girard, being converted to Christianity as early as 1959, took a long time to become wholly explicit about his relationship to the Christian faith and the Church. The first series of interviews with Jacques Derrida *ever*, published under the title *Positions* in 1972, starts with a notice by Derrida himself in which he almost proudly – as if refusing interviews is a virtue – states: “These three interviews, the only ones in which I have ever taken part, concern ongoing publications.”³ Derrida’s resistance to giving interviews in his early career is matched by his verdict in the sixties to have his photograph published. Early publications by Derrida, as well as many later ones, shy the convention of showing a photograph of the author on the cover of his books. For many young fascinated readers, like me, it took quite a long time to find out how Derrida looked (and to find out how handsome he actually was). Derrida will later on explain that he was not so much intent on resisting disclosing personal information, but rather on resisting the conventions surrounding the phenomenon “book”.⁴

René Girard has largely remained reticent throughout his career, whereas Derrida can really be said to have opened up, even to the extent of plunging into wild confessional writings.⁵ However, the amount of biographical information available of both of these thinkers is not limited by their personal inclinations. One could say, to a certain extent, that Girard and Derrida are *obliged* to disclose certain sections of their lives, because their theories in a fundamental way point to areas normally thought of as lying outside the theoretical domain.

Necessarily, there will be theory in this presentation, but I will also focus on their biographies. In the case of Derrida, I will pay due attention to the documentary mentioned above. In the case of Girard I will pay a similar attention to the first and autobiographical chapter in his *Evolution and Conversion*.

3. Derrida

3.0 The notion of *the text*

I would like to start with the word “supplement”, as analyzed in Derrida’s most famous work *Of Grammatology*. Anybody who is familiar with the work of Derrida will recognize this word “supplement” as one of the keywords in his oeuvre. There are quite a number of these keywords – like “trace”, “*différance*” or “pharmakon” – words that are not really interchangeable, but have nevertheless a lot in common.

Because we are dealing with an important term or with a key term, it would be natural to ask the question: now what does it *mean* – this word “supplement”? But I believe this is the wrong question to ask. In his extensive discussions of the word “supplement” and “supplementarity” in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida notices, in the reading exercise he is performing – that is, reading a number of texts by Jean-Jacques Rousseau - that this word “supplement” *works* in a certain way. The word “supplement”, like most of the keywords in Derrida’s oeuvre, is a word that carries profound ambiguities into the texts in which it can be retraced. Now I will not try to summarize this elaborate discussion in *Of Grammatology*, but just say a few things about this word.

First of all, the word “supplement” is not a philosophically technical term – it is just a word taken from everyday life, an ordinary word. If you really insist on wanting to know what it *means*, you can look it up in the dictionary (eventually a dictionary in Rousseau’s time) to start with. Apparently this word frequently came to Rousseau’s mind. We may find it in his philosophical works, his literary works, the *Confessions* and his letters. Rousseau uses this word mostly freely and more or less thoughtlessly, and it would probably never have occurred to him that this word “supplement” would ever be deemed so crucial to his discourse.

Derrida starts his discussion in a chapter entitled “... That Dangerous Supplement...”⁶ with a fragment about Rousseau’s choice to become a writer taken from his *Confessions* and notices that in personal life writing is differently valued as in his philosophical discourse on language. The full term in the title of the chapter – dangerous supplement – is a quotation from another part in Rousseau’s *Confessions*, and here the context is not writing, but sexuality, that is, *masturbation*. Also here one finds Rousseau attaching different values at different moments. These occurrences of the notion of supplementarity (writing as a supplement to speech, masturbation as a supplement to sexual intercourse) relating to Rousseau’s personal life, explicitly mentioned in the *Confessions*, are just two instances of the problematic of supplementarity that according to Derrida governs the whole of Rousseau’s writing. We may find this word “supplement” travelling from theoretical space to personal space and back again, and it is Derrida’s contention that *any occurrence of this word matters*.

It is here that Derrida has to call to assistance his notion of *the text*. When breaking with reading conventions, Derrida requires a word that encompasses both life and work, and the word that has to perform the job is *the text*. *The text* is the large span of language in which words can traverse conventional borders, barriers marking off well-defined discursive areas or barriers in genre. Words (belonging to a single language) know no fences unless we set them up.⁷ Words may move freely from one area to another, like birds flying in the sky over the Berlin Wall during the Cold War, flying

from West to East. And very often, while traversing these areas, words may carry their connotations or hidden metaphysical investments with them.⁸

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida explicitly comments on his unconventional approach of bringing together the word “supplement” as used in the Rousseau’s *Confessions* and the same word as used in his philosophical writings. An outright statement is:

It is so little a matter of looking for a *truth signified* by these writings (metaphysical or psychological truth: Jean Jacques’s life behind his work) that if the texts that interest us *mean* something, it is the engagement and the appurtenance that encompass existence and writing in the same *tissue*, the same *text*. [italics J.D.].⁹

The notion of *the text*, is meant to counteract the whole idea that there is a biographical Rousseau writing about “biographical supplements” on the one hand (sexuality and the personal experience of writing), and a theoretical Rousseau writing about “theoretical supplements” on the other. Words are *telling* – no matter whether they can be harvested from personal or theoretical areas.

In Derrida’s writing *the text* is truly a vast entity. It may put all conventions and barriers between brackets, and it may even manifest itself as a jealous god. One of the most famous sayings of Derrida, repeatedly enounced in *Of Grammatology* is – “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*”, for which my English copy serves two translations: “*there is nothing outside of the text*” and “*there is no outside-text*”.¹⁰ Usually this statement is understood as a pronouncement that there is no referentiality, or that language does not refer to something which may be said to *exist* in the real world, that is, outside of texts. Is this a true understanding? Well, certainly it is not an understanding that exhausts Derrida’s notion of *the text*. Instead of going to argue about this, I would like to add a few more paragraphs on the *richness* of this notion.

One way to describe Derrida’s analysis is that it makes a shift from the point of view from the writer to the point of view of the words themselves. *Words travel*. Words pre-exist before they enter any biographical world, before they flow from any pen or keyboard into another text. And also – words and texts will always survive the authors they have visited. These long distance runarounds of words, traveling from one century to another, entering and leaving all kinds of biographical and theoretical worlds, the ideas and metaphysical associations they carry with them, but also the social or historical upheavals they may reflect¹¹, the language-specific homonymic¹² inferences that always, inevitably, clot to words, form all part of this outstretched domain Derrida calls *the text*.

This famous phrase “*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*”, also enounces that, when studying the life and the work of someone who is *absent*, someone who is *dead* that is, we have to rely on texts – Rousseau’s own texts, the letters he had written, the texts he had read, the texts the readers of the texts Rousseau had read had read, and so on, *ad infinitum*. There is no other source than *the text*, that is, we can only make an attempt to reach Rousseau’s life by documentary or textual evidence, and however many documents prove to be available or may be discovered at a later moment in history, we will be sure that we will never reach his true being.

Such pronouncements seem to suggest that it is impossible to write an intellectual biography at all, or to come anywhere *near* the life of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or to the life of any other philosopher. In shirking the conventional means of representing the life of a philosopher, one might think that philosophers from then on will always remain at an insurmountable distance. Any product of the

biographical imagination may then be seen as suspect. There are no stories but the ones given by the philosophers themselves and the only things that are left is text and textual analysis. Surprisingly and maybe even paradoxically, Derrida's nitty-gritty analyses of single words and metaphors in the text seems to bring the life of a thinker like Rousseau closer to the reader than an ordinary biography would do.

Textual analysis in a sense may surpass conventional biographical writing, or in Derrida's own words, taken from the Dick and Kofman documentary we are about to discuss:

We should not neglect the fact that some biographies written by people who have authority in the academy finally invest this authority in a book which, for centuries sometimes, after the death of an author, represents the Truth. If someone interested in biography writes *Life and Works of Heidegger* – well documented, apparently consistent, and it's the only one – published by, under the authority of a good press – then Heidegger's image, Heidegger's life image is fixed and stabilized for centuries. That's why I would say that sometimes, the one who reads a text by a philosopher, for instance a tiny paragraph, and interprets it in a rigorous, inventive and powerfully deciphering fashion is more of a real biographer than the one who knows the whole story.¹³

3.1 The documentary *Derrida*

Finally, before moving on to René Girard, I would like, by showing a fragment from the documentary entitled *Derrida*, to illustrate the idea that breaking with conventions of biographical writing can have very powerful biographical effects. I will make this fragment available on a website, as well as a number of other fragments that are relevant to this presentation. At the moment, the documentary is fully available on Youtube. You can find the links in the full version of this presentation on the COV&R website.¹⁴

Before we go on, we should notice that Derrida's notion of the text does not really depend on the medium. Paintings in the past, photographs at later times, sound recordings, films, documentaries – all are part of *the text*, the great vast thing in which you are always involved in terms of reading, in terms of signs and signification, in terms of interpreting, in terms of deciphering, in terms of inscribing your own words. In the named documentary *Derrida* there is an extreme awareness of the textuality of the documentary itself. It is a work that is continuously reiterating questions about making portraits of philosophers and continuously criticizing the art of documentary-making itself.

One could surmise that such an unflinching vigilance, the continuous presence of a meta-level of observing, the continuous desire to *refuse* the idea that a true to life portrait of a philosopher is being made, would result in a very cerebral, sterile product. But in the documentary *Derrida* the opposite proves to be the case. After having watched the documentary *Derrida*, conventional documentaries of philosophers may work out as stale and sterile because of the way they employ cliché's and because of the way they are often full of unquestioned presuppositions about the way personal life relates to theory.

Yes, conventional documentaries often create a sort of *fata morgana* of human realness. Recently I watched a number of documentaries about Dutch academics who had been successful in different disciplines, ranging from theology to mathematics.¹⁵ No matter the discipline, no matter the person

in question – as an observer of all these portraits you can hardly avoid noticing a recurring pattern. Well aware of being filmed, well aware of being caught *outside of their discipline*, the academics collaborated in creating an *image*, a representation of what the uncritical reader or watcher would deem to be their humanity, their true life, their inner depths. You witness the inevitable talks with students, with the tutor always getting the better of the argument. There are those intimate moments, playing with the dog or with the children, kissing the spouse goodbye. And, worst of all, there are these meditations – on a beach with the sea decoratively roaring in the distance, or on a mountain path with vistas to other snow-clad mountaintops. Freed from the confines of their discipline, we find the professors meditating on good and evil, ecology, politics or the future of the world. Sometimes thoughts may flow over into something resembling religion, into half-mystic confessions.

The documentary on Derrida is different. Derrida defies these constructions, shows that he is aware of the constructionary force – or, with a more contemporary term we could say *the framing force* – of documentary-making. There is an attempt to resist these forces, sincere, though without definite success. Nevertheless, Derrida's resistance leaves its traces, and make this documentary into a different portrait from the run-of-the-mill man-behind-the-works picture. Vanity and narcissism are inevitable forces in this type of registration, and they are certainly not absent in the Dick & Kofman production – but vanity and narcissism are brought into balance by criticism, relativism and humor.¹⁶ There is a continuous awareness that something like the creation of an *imago* is going on, there is a vigilance that this *imago* will not prevail, there is a persistent irony which makes it possible for Derrida to explicitly express that he is the star of the movie – something the academics in a classical documentary (while playing with their dogs or gazing in the distance and uttering their thoughts about the future of the world) would never be able to do.

Certainly it would be very vain to enlarge on personal habits, but Derrida can allow himself to say that he usually works in pajamas. It is not a matter of a truthsaying declaration – *mon nom est Derrida, j'écris en pyjama* – but it passes by as an argument in a discussion about the truthfulness of camera registrations. Camera's influence behavior and so Derrida chooses to get dressed in the morning before the camera crew arrives. Camera's only *suggest* the recording of an "objective reality" - can there be a better example than Derrida's refusal to show himself in pajamas?

In the next fragment the conventions of philosophy and biography are turned upside down. Usually (auto)biographical information is pushed to the outskirts or the margins of a book, to the preface, the epilogue, the footnotes.¹⁷ In the fragment we are about to show, biographical information is right in the middle, whereas philosophical discussion is put at the beginning and at the end. Here it is:¹⁸ ([watch](#))

[Derrida lecturing]

As you know, the traditional philosophy, *excludes* biography. It considers biography as something external to philosophy. You remember Heidegger's statement about Aristotle. Heidegger once was asked: "What was the life of Aristotle?" What could we answer to the question: "What was Aristotle's life?" Well, the answer is very simple. Aristotle was a philosopher. The answer holds in one sentence: He was born, he thought, and he died.¹⁹ And all the rest is pure anecdote.

[Voiceover with music²⁰ – Close-ups of Derrida's face, walking through a street, smoking pipe]

His mother's grave is profaned.
His parents never read any of his books.
He cries out *mommy, I am scared* every night until she lets him sleep on a sofa near them.

One side of his face is paralyzed for three weeks, leaving his eye open, continuously, unblinking.
His father composes his own death notice, shortly before he dies of cancer.
He is expelled from school because he is Jewish.
He learns he was given a secret name - Elie, after the Jewish prophet Elijah – that isn't on his birth certificate.
He fails his first entrance exams to the university.
He writes his first novel at the age of fifteen, about the theft of a diary, and blackmail for its return.
He pretends to learn Hebrew, so as to read it without understanding it.
He is arrested and thrown in prison, for 24 hours in Prague, for transporting drugs the authorities plant on him.
He receives a collect call from someone who identifies himself as *Martini Heidegger*.
He declines an offer from Marguerite Duras to play a part in one of her films.
As an adolescent, he dreams of becoming a professional soccer player.
He doesn't circumcise his sons, greatly upsetting his mother and father.
He suffers from sleeplessness and nervous collapse from the overuse of sleeping tablets and amphetamines.
His older brother was only seven days, dying just a year before he was born.²¹

[Derrida lecturing]

Classical philosophers usually avoid autobiography. It is because they think it's indecent. That is, a philosopher should not speak of himself as an empirical being. And this impoliteness or, this politeness is philosophy itself, in principle. So if we want to break with this philosophical axiom, classical philosophical axiom, according to which a philosopher should not present himself, or give in to autobiography, then we have to be indecent to some extent.

[Voiceover – Close-ups of Derrida's hair being cut in a barber's shop – quote from "The Ear of the Other"]²²

We no longer consider the biography of a philosopher as a set of empirical accidents that leaves one with a name that within itself be offered up to philosophical reading – the only kind of reading held to be philosophically legitimate. Neither readings of philosophical systems nor external, empirical-genetic readings have ever in themselves questioned the dynamics of that borderline between the "work" and the "life", the system and the subject of the system. This borderline – is neither active nor passive. It's neither outside nor inside. It is most especially not a thin line, an invisible or indivisible trait that lies between philosophy on the one hand, and the life of an author on the other.

4. Girard

4.0 Mimetic drunkenness

The notion of *the text*, as an endless realm of signification from which – when breaking with reading conventions – all kinds of insights can be harvested, is certainly there in the thought of René Girard. And so is the idea that textual analysis of tiny fragments may be far more revealing than exhaustive and erudite exercises. An interesting example of this latter is the analysis Girard makes of a paper article on a familial drama by Marcel Proust at the end of *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, in which a reference is made to the state of lucidity Don Quichote experiences at the end of Cervantes' novel.²³ This *aside* in a paper article by Marcel Proust nobody remembers, is crucial information and shows that the consistency Girard is after for his own theory was genuinely present in the mind of Marcel Proust himself. As always, there are many fascinating touch points between the writings of Derrida and Girard which can be pursued in all kinds of directions. The course I will take here is to focus on the autobiographical opening chapter of *Evolution and Conversion*.

While discussing Derrida we have seen how an ordinary word like “supplement” may move from personal space into theoretical space. For this freedom words have, I used the metaphor of the sky over Berlin during the Cold War in which birds may fly from West to East. But of course they may also fly from East to West. There are also words that travel from theory to personal life. One such word is *mimesis*. *Mimesis* is not a word that is really used in everyday language, either in French, in German or in English. The Greek stem survives in words like “mime” and “mimicry”, but it are basically the Latin derivatives that have entered our vernaculars: imitation, imitative. In the Germanic languages²⁴ we have correlatives like *Nachfolge* in German and *navolging* in Dutch.

Nevertheless, this technical term *mimesis*, as probably many of you will have experienced, easily descends into everyday language – I am now talking in the context of a familiarity with Girard's mimetic theory. This phenomenon, the migration or expansion of an initially theoretical term into everyday language will occur all the more easily when you make part of a community concerned with this theory. For me, as a member of the Dutch Girard Society, a group of people meeting five times a year and exchanging a lot of emails in between, the word “mimetic” has become part and parcel of my verbal make-up. It has grown into an almost natural word, it is always at hand, and it occurs every now and then in my dreams. I even have come to associate mimetism with *smell*. Some gatherings, some parties “smell” more mimetic than others. There are many moments in my life in which I suddenly realize that the people I am talking to are not part of this community, forcing me to *translate* the to me intimate word “mimetic” into terms my audience can understand.

The phenomenon I am describing here could be understood as *jargonizing* – but, as I will try to point out, there is certainly more to the word “mimetic” than merely jargon. In doing so I will now read a passage from René Girard. The passage I want to focus on is a story René Girard tells about his young days, a passage that occurs in the beginning chapter of *Evolution and Conversion*. Born in Avignon, with his father being the curator of the Castle of the Popes, Girard, together with someone named Jacques and who is named his “best friend at the time”, organized an exhibition of a number of paintings by Pablo Picasso in this same Castle in Avignon. Girard and his friend Jacques were to drive the paintings to be exhibited in “a little truck” from Paris to Avignon.

And then Girard writes about this episode in his life:

My friend and I were in a state of continuous mimetic drunkenness (Fr: *ivresse*) at the thought of being involved in such important cultural events.

And a little bit later:

One of the main causes of our excitement (again Fr: *ivresse*) in those days was the fact that we were hanging around daily with actresses such as Sylvia Monfort and Jeanne Moreau who had just finished acting school and were still largely unknown.²⁵

Here, obviously, the word “mimetic” has travelled into personal space. And again, I want to propose the question – what does it mean? What could it be? What does the word “mimetic” mean in a term like “mimetic drunkenness”, used in an autobiographical context like this?

To want to describe what this word mimetic truly *means*, is, I believe, just as questionable as to describe, or to give a definite meaning to Derrida’s word “supplement”. The word “mimetic”, used in an autobiographical context, is a word that *operates* in a certain way. It is a word that reorders the past and creates a double perspective. More accurately, the word “mimetic”, used in an autobiographical context, is a *sign of being able to reorder the past* and creating a double perspective. This ability, according to Girard, *is the true fountainhead of literary genius*. Great novelists can write great novels just because they can retrace a certain mimetic bedazzlement and are able to describe and evoke this bedazzlement in a later state of being sobered up, creating at the same time an inside and an outside view. It is this *double entendre* what constitutes irony, comedy.

According to Girard, great novelistic writing is a way of acknowledging to have shared in something mimetic. If you are truly able to use a term like “mimetic drunkenness” seriously to a fragment of your own life, you are sharing a key experience with the lives of great novelists. The five *romanesque* novelists Girard singles out in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* each have lived through their own intoxications. Dostoevsky, probably the author most prone to addiction, must have, apart from gambling, been bedazzled by the revolutionary bands in 19th century Russia, making him one of the great prophets of modern terrorism. Stendhal, though being one of the most difficult authors to handle in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, certainly must have experienced *the vanity* he describes and denounces. Then we have Gustav Flaubert with his famous exclamation “*Madame Bovary, c’est moi*”, which just says it all.

Particularly about Cervantes and Proust, Girard is very explicit. They have been very drunken, yet they also have managed to sober up in a very decent way. To offer a few quotes from *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*:

Cervantes could not have written *Don Quixote* if the same object had not been for him an enchanted helmet and then an ordinary barber’s basin. The novelist is a man who has overcome desire and who, remembering it, can *make a comparison*. (italics R.G.)²⁶

The novelist who reveals triangular desire cannot be a snob but he must have been one. He must have known desire but must now be beyond it. The Fauborg is an enchanted helmet to the snob and a barber’s basin to the nonsnob. Every day we are told that the world is controlled by “concrete”

desires: wealth, well-being, power, oil, etc. The novelist asks an apparently harmless question: “What is snobbism?”²⁷

Marcel Proust had once been a snob and Miguel Cervantes had once been a knight of the woeful countenance – these writers have a full intimacy to the way mimetic drunkenness works and may overrule empirical life. All the novelists focused on in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* have experienced the strange transformations mimetic desire may cause.

4.1 Conversion

The word “mimetic”, whenever it starts to enter personal life, creates a double perspective. It is the difference between what you were once and what you are now. If you are telling a story of being exhilarated by visiting Picasso in Paris you are still in the romantic mood. Today, we call it namedropping, which is just another brand of snobbism. In order to arrive at a truly ironic double perspective on a single story of your own life, *something must have happened in between*. The word Girard prominently uses for this interruption is *conversion*. There are important reasons to welcome this word, but there also reasons to object to this word.

Let me start with the objections. A first thing to think about is that we seem to be slowly moving into a post-individualist era. Imitation today is less of a scandal as it used to be in the middle decades of the 20th century. The ideal of authenticity seems to be on the wane. Understanding one’s own mimetism may be less and less of a revelation. Today, you are not really exceptional if you openly admit to have models or that imitation plays an important role in your mental make-up. Such pronouncements have stopped to evoke derision. This does not mean that we are expecting an end to metaphysical desire in the near future. Metaphysical desire may crop up in new, unexpected places, places where the romantic ideals of self-sufficiency and authenticity are less important.²⁸

When choosing the word *conversion*, and while sticking to this same word in his later works, Girard is introducing all kinds of Christian connotations to what should be the key moment of mimetic insight. Definitely, this adherence to this word forms an obstacle to many secular readers who are sympathetic to Girard’s theories. Mimetic insight may arise in many different ways and under very different circumstances. Also there may be very many differences in pace and in range. There are all kinds of experiences in which someone may arrive at mimetic insight, experiences which do not necessarily have to carry the whole burden of a true lightning-bolt christoform *conversion* with them. To a certain degree any step in the slow process of “getting older and wiser” can contain elements of mimetic insight. There is something monomaniac about the way Girard wants to block off smaller or non-christian dealings with mimetic self-insight.

I think we are not exaggerating when we say that Girard is enforcing his own experience on how mimetic revelation should work in the lives of others. In the story of his own conversion, located in 1959, Girard distinguishes between an intellectual conversion and a religious conversion. The intellectual conversion is the dissipation of autonomy, the discovery that you are just as mimetic as anyone else. The religious conversion that followed, amounted to becoming a true believing

Christian, becoming part of a religious community, which meant, for Girard, entering the Catholic Church.

Girard is ambiguous about these two distinct conversions. In his extensive interview with Michel Treguer *Quand ses chose commenceront...*, recently issued in an English translation *When These Things Begin*, Girard initially seems to play down the intellectual conversion:

Intellectually, I was converted, but I remained incapable of making my life agree with what I thought. For a period of a few months, faith was for me a blissful delicacy that heightened my other pleasures, one more treat in a life that, while it was far from being criminal, was, as the English language puts it so well, pure *self-indulgence*.²⁹

Nevertheless, a little bit later, after having described his entrance into the Church, Girard says:

And what was most amazing for me about the whole thing was that my intellectual and spiritual conviction, my true conversion, had occurred before my great Lenten scare.³⁰

This “Lenten scare”, after all, is just an episode of being frightened by a form of skin cancer. You can read the whole of Girard’s conversion story in *When These Things Begin* - or in the opening section of Wolfgang Palaver’s book *René Girard’s Mimetic Theory* in which this conversion passage is quoted in full.

The true conversion is an intellectual conversion to mimetic theory, which somehow has to be followed by a religious conversion – this seems to be Girard’s recipe for attaining self-knowledge. In another fragment in *Evolution and Conversion*, giving an answer to the question “Are you suggesting that the understanding of mimetic theory presupposes that we acknowledge our own mimetism?” it is expressed like this:

Yes. There cannot be any positivistic separation between observer and the object of observation: we are all implicated in the mechanism. The mimetic theory demands an ‘existential understanding’ to be fully grasped. [...] The religious aspects are inseparable from the scientific ones, because ultimately science and religion are *both* concerned with *understanding*: religion is a true human science. This understanding is related to the involvement of the subject within the mimetic system, because from the refusal to involve the subject in it, all sorts of epistemological problems and fallacies emerge, such as the way in which the subject always tries to avoid undifferentiation and the emergence of the doubles, always thinking in terms of difference. [...]

In this context, conversion means the accepting of the mimetic nature of desire. Otherwise, one would fall back on the old authentic inauthentic binary opposition, which is the perspective of mimetic desire that hasn’t been acknowledged as such. The ‘inauthentic’ person is the one who follows directives from others, whereas the ‘authentic’ is the person who desires autonomously. We have already seen how misleading and illusory this sort of individualism is. The only way to overcome it is through a conversion, which ultimately leads to a revision of one’s own religious belief.³¹

Girard's promise of mimetic enlightenment seems to suggest that we have to do what Girard had to do, to see it through without exemption, that we have to do it *his way*, "the only way". I think there is an *excess* of autobiography in the way he describes the involvement of the subject in mimetism.

Still, it all makes sense. Still, "conversion" is a very telling metaphor, and the Christian connotations mentioned earlier, are almost indispensable. It cannot be denied: gaining mimetic insight is related to the Christian notion of *sin* – sins that particularly come to mind being: pride, vanity and envy. There are many roads to mimetic self-knowledge, but it is hard to imagine a way of travelling this route without having to overcome or to get liberated from some forms of pride, vanity or envy.

So coming to understand mimetic theory is not just a matter of making a cognitive shift, like embracing a new psychological theory after psychoanalysis. Sometimes, when I explain mimetic theory to someone unfamiliar with it, lecturing about the mimetic nature of desire – a first reaction can be: "Well then, what solution does Girard propose??" As if mimetic theory will give you some specialist's insight in this nasty problem, privileging its adherents with new tools and methods to reach genuine authenticity. Such an understanding of mimetic theory is completely wrong. Claiming an understanding of mimetic theory *implies* having to take a look at your own life. Yes, applying mimetic theory to your personal life is perhaps *the main thing*.

5. Finally...

Jacques Derrida and René Girard, each in their own ways, break down the barrier between personal life and theory. Derrida's extensive analysis of the word "supplement" can be matched to an extensive analysis of the word "mimetic" in the work of René Girard³² – an enterprise far beyond the scope of this paper. But there are many other words whose journeys through different types of texts are worthwhile following. In singling out the term "mimetic drunkenness", we picked on the word "mimetic", but we might as well have focused our attention on the word *ivresse* – drunkenness or intoxication and go on to discuss terms like "the intoxicating success of the natural sciences"³³.

This discussion has been not so much about the possibility of referentiality, but about the possible *fertility* of tracing words that travel around in minds, films, books, archives, through time and space, crossing barriers and jumping from genre to genre. The complaint of the sterility of deconstruction, of being mere word games is not really justified. As always, there is good deconstruction and bad deconstruction, as there will be differences of quality in articles written on mimetic theory. To me, a student of literature, Derrida and Girard both remain the greatest exegetes of the 20th century.

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¹ Girard actually employs this term: "I'm just a sort of exegete" – it is his answer to the question "Are you a prophet?". WTTB, p.132.

² See the bibliography, henceforward D.

³ P, p.vii.

⁴ See the *No Photographs* section in D on the supporting website.

⁵ See particularly *Circumfession*, which is really an extraordinary, transgressive text.

⁶ This extraordinary textual presentation with the ellipses is taken from the original, that is, the English translation. OG, p.141.

⁷ On the contrary, we also may look back on a history in which a sacred language – Latin – in medieval philosophy and the beginning of modern philosophy (Descartes, Spinoza), virtually closed off the word-traffic between philosophy and everyday live.

⁸ Derrida is known to be a thinker of the "signifier", but in many instances in *Of Grammatology* it can be shown that Derrida is not so much thinking about the word itself, but more about the "concept" the word signifies. This is what makes a word like *supplement* more or less translatable and replaceable by *différance*. It is not necessarily the pure signifier that matters. Consequently, inevitably, the concept of the "concept" – which can

be understood as the first step into referentiality and outside of the pure sign – is profoundly problematized in Derrida’s thought.

⁹ OG, p.150.

¹⁰ OG, p.158.

¹¹ Words can be carriers of historical upheavals. For instance, the meaning of the German word *Führer* today undoubtedly differs from the meaning of the selfsame word in 1880 or 1935. And also other derivatives of this German stem – *führen, Führung* – are involved. So it can be a very fruitful and interesting, but also a very delicate exercise to analyze this word in the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger. EO, p.27vv.

¹² Homonyms, one word carrying two meanings, often figure in untranslatable puns: “Why are movie stars so cool? Because they have so many fans.” Is this a riddle about popularity or about temperature? Because of homonymy, this riddle offers itself to both a mimetic and non-mimetic reading.

¹³ D 6:32 to 7:52, see also *Biography I* on the supporting website.

¹⁴ See the address in the Bibliography.

¹⁵ *De magie van wetenschap*. De Familie/Human, 2010.

¹⁶ Narcissism is always a problem when being portrayed or interviewed, cf. René Girard: “I’m not concealing my biography, but I don’t want to fall victim to the narcissism to which we’re all inclined.” WTTB, p.129. See also the section on Narcissism from the supportive website.

¹⁷ One has to think of the Derrida’s wonderful essay on prefaces *Hors d’Oeuvre* at the beginning of his *Dissemination*.

¹⁸ D 8:25 to 13:20, see also the Fragment Showed section on the supporting website.

¹⁹ One can doubt the relevance of this statement, because it is more a statement about Aristotle than about biography in general. See [Richard Polt’s review](#) of Heidegger’s *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*.

²⁰ The music is from Ryuichi Sakamoto.

²¹ Most of these statements (maybe all of them) are not taken from a secret, intimate knowledge of the life Derrida secretly shared with the documentary makers, but are taken from and can be retraced in *Circumfession* and *La Carte Postale*.

²² EO, p.5.

²³ DCC, p.301.

²⁴ Because so many Latinate words entered the English language, English discourse often more resembles French than German discourse.

²⁵ E&C, p.21. One may wonder what can be so exciting about young actresses who *are not yet famous*. Maybe some of the *ivresse* is still lingering on at the moment of telling the story.

²⁶ DCC, p.233.

²⁷ DCC, p.220.

²⁸ Desire, I believe, is to an import degree mediated by *values*. This idea often meets with a lot of resistance among adherents of mimetic theory, saying that this is a step back, a return to a bipolar, subject-object conception of desire, a kind of epistemological regression. But when I use the word *value* I am not referring to something that has “fallen from the sky or had been prescribed in the wax of the brain” (cf. Derrida, P. p.80), but to something that in itself has a mimetic origin. Values can be internalized, making the origin, the mimetic *mise en scene*, invisible, unreachable even. Models engender values, but values may also engender models – this forgetfulness of the original model is in itself wholly compatible with mimetic theory. The mimetic system will always be there, but the value of authenticity, like any other value, may dwindle.

²⁹ WTTB, p.129-130.

³⁰ WTTB, p.131.

³¹ E&C, p. 173. Note the Derridean language of “binary oppositions” in this passage. Also consider: “In a talk at a recent COV&R meeting in Boston, Raymund Schwager said that my theory requires a conversion, because the main thing is understanding that one is always part of the mimetic mechanism. I think that the problematic of authenticity, of existential authenticity, is important. What is authentic and what is inauthentic desire? Inauthentic desire is the desire that is influenced by others. When, for instance, Heidegger thinks of others, he always refers to the crowd. This is a pre-understanding of mimetic desire, which, however, excludes the self, because the self is always inevitably authentic in opposition to the others. The invention of mimetic desire is, in a way, only the suppression of that distinction: there is no authentic desire and any desire is mediated by others. But this suppression implies the conversion to which Schwager was referring. A conversion in which you accept that you are part of the mimetic mechanism which rules human relationships, in which the observer acknowledges the fact that he himself is implicated in his observation. The distinction between an ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ desire is not always groundless, but when it coincides with the distinction between myself and the others, I think it is quite suspicious. Martin Heidegger believes that he stands apart from any mimetic

influence from his social surrounding, with Das Man, that is the tagging along of all these people who believe and desire everything which is believed and desired around them. Therefore, in the moment in which everybody became a Nazi around him, Heidegger became Nazi too..." E&C, p. 45-46.

³² The word *mimesis*, by the way, also occurs very often in the work of Jacques Derrida.

³³ See for instance WTTB, p.52: "The success of science have given rise to an enormous amount of idolatry and have led to its being considered as a group of specific methods: but its success, it seems to me, is due less to method than the type of object studied by thinking freed from the ancient constraints of the sacred. This success is so intoxicating [Fr: *enivrant*] that the social and human sciences never give up hoping to become "truly scientific" by transporting the methods that work in the hard sciences into their domains. All they end up doing is impoverishing their own object of study."