

Chapter Thirteen

Hermeneutical Mimesis

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Since Aristotle, mimesis has been a key concept in traditional theories of art and literature. Mimesis is a cultural concept in the first place. The meaning of mimesis covers both imitation and performance aspects of art. It refers to “representation of reality,” in German: *Dargestellte Wirklichkeit*, as the subtitle of Erich Auerbach’s classical study says it (2003). Contemporary critical theories, interpreting art and literature from re- and deconstructive aspects still rely heavily on mimesis (e.g., Derrida 1979). Mimesis has also a natural meaning. Life sciences such as evolutionary biology (de Waal 2009) and neurosciences (Jacoboni 2008) show mimetic features at the heart of human—and not only human—nature. Mimesis seems to be no less than the core of both human nature and human culture.

Over recent decades, the French-American thinker René Girard has taken mimesis as the starting point of his Copernican theory of human nature and culture—language, art, religion, literature, philosophy, and science (1987). Like Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, and others who have changed the way we think in the humanities and in the human sciences, Girard has proposed a set of ideas that has altered our perceptions and interpretations of the world we live in. Behind our common sense self-understanding as autonomous and authentic individuals, Girard has unveiled the mimetic character of desire and the scapegoat mechanism on the other as the hidden motives of our thinking and our conduct (1986). Moreover, in his explorations of the relations between the sacred and violence, he has hit upon the origins of culture—the way culture began, the way it continues to organize itself, the way communities of human beings structure themselves in a manner that is different from that of other species on the planet (1979).

Girard is most famous for his hermeneutical reading of modern literature, classical myths, and biblical stories. Being a literary scholar in the first place,

a theorist of literature, he has developed literature itself as a theory: a theory on culture, on myth, on religion, especially sacrifice, rituals, and biblical themes. However, Girard's narrative thinking has alienated him, in a way, from mainstream philosophy and social sciences, which rather seem to prefer an arguing style of rationality through general concepts and abstract schemes. This alienation is the more unfortunate as Girard's ideas have a huge philosophical and scientific relevance.

In this chapter, I will add a philosophical approach to Girard's narrative-hermeneutical work on mimesis. Unlike Girard, who stresses the contagious and unavoidable aspects of our mimesis of models, I will argue that a relatively free, creative relationship between the moral agent and the model can be realized. However, it is not my purpose to replace Girard's concept by an ideal, so-called "pure" alternative of free creative mimesis. I cannot and will not ignore the contagious and manifest effects of mimetic desire Girard identifies. On the contrary, I recognize the addictive power of mimesis. I will show, nevertheless, that if grasped at the heart of mimesis, this power turns out to be helpful to an interpretive approach to the model. To this end, hermeneutics should not only disclose the phenomenon of mimesis as such, as Girard does, but the relationship between the moral agent and the exemplary model should itself be conceived as hermeneutical. In my view, the inspiration provided by a model or exemplar is carried out as a kind of interpretation, a hermeneutics-by-doing, so to say. Indeed, inspiration can be contagious, but from a hermeneutical relation to it one can preserve a relative freedom of interpretation.

First I will focus on the narrative character of the inspirational relationships with models and exemplars. Then the hermeneutical approach can be elaborated upon. I conclude by sharpening some aspects of the hermeneutical mimesis of exemplary figures and models. As to the wording, it goes without saying that the meaning of "inspiration" is in itself neutral, and may refer to both positive (encouraging) and negative (violent) effects. I use "model" to refer to the model of mimetic desire in Girard, and "exemplar" to refer to the model to which the moral agent has a hermeneutical relationship. Thus, the question of this chapter may be recapitulated as how to turn a model into an exemplar.

EXEMPLARS AND NARRATIVE

What is an exemplar? In my view, this question should be answered from within the relationship between the moral agent and the inspiring model. It would not make sense to distinguish a class of objectively present models or exemplars, e.g., people having the quality of being able to inspire. Inspiration is a relational concept, not an individual's feature. This relational concept is

in line with Girard's idea of humans as interindividuals. Consequently, inspiration can only be adequately grasped by reflecting on the experience of being inspired by an exemplar. Such experiences include, for instance, taking heart from a courageous person, or coping with a confusing situation by following the example of a wise friend. From a relational perspective, the experience of being inspired is not exceptional but quite common. Anybody who has had to make a fundamental decision, or who has suffered or loved, who had to bear a loss, or who experienced friendship, will know the power of an inspiring exemplar. In all these existential areas, a certain dignity and an excellence can be achieved by taking an eminent paradigm as a model; by directing oneself to exemplary courage, to outstanding wisdom, to respectable perseverance, to model friendship, etc.

These examples show that an exemplar is not necessarily a saint or a recognized hero. Ordinary people can be exemplars, as well. Well-known moral heroes like Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Gandhi inspire large numbers of people, whereas my grandmother may only inspire me. Inspiration depends on what the exemplar represents to a certain inspired moral agent: courage, perseverance, justice, generosity, or just a particular skill. I use the general word "value" to denote what the exemplar represents, what the model embodies, and what at the same time triggers me, challenges me, activates me, or—in brief—inspires me as a moral agent. Such inspiring values can be embodied by living exemplars in someone's social environment, but also by certain characters in novels or films, or by celebrities, artists, politicians, historical figures, etc.

In sharp contrast to the evident meaning of exemplary figures in our moral lives is their remarkably humble status in modern ethics. Modern ethical reasoning is mainly based upon principles, values, virtues and beneficial goals, though rarely upon authoritative or inspiring exemplars (Beauchamp 2001). Although in the history of Western Culture, the imitation of exemplars has been both an important ethical principle and a widely extended moral practice—e.g., the exemplarily embodied virtues in Aristotelian ethics, the imitation of saints and of Christ himself in Christianity—in modern ethics, the role of exemplars seems to have been downgraded to the sole position of only instances, merely illustrating general and abstract moral rules and statements. The humble status of imitation in modern ethics has also been confirmed by moral psychology. In the well-known developmental-psychological theory of Lawrence Kohlberg, which is based on a Kantian view, acting according to an exemplar is considered to be specific to a lower grade of moral development—it is actually supposed to indicate moral immaturity—while acting in accordance with general moral rules would mark the highest degree of moral conduct (Kohlberg 1984; c.f. Gilligan 1982). The reason for this poor rank might be that mimesis of exemplary figures seems to be incompatible with currently important and widely shared values such as

autonomy and authenticity. One could easily object, however, that for such values to be appealing and engaging they need to be embodied and demonstrated by exemplary figures actually inspiring to autonomy and authenticity.

Yet there are some exceptions among contemporary ethicists who treat the importance of exemplars to our moral conduct. One of them is Edith Wyschogrod, who in her remarkable study *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisiting Moral Philosophy* (1990) discusses the present-day significance of hagiographies to moral action. Although she hardly focuses specifically on the imitation of saints, her account of what she calls the “saintly effect” is considerably valuable to our subject matter. In my view, the meaning of imitation is not confined to saints in the literal and acknowledged sense, although they make up the main paradigm in Christian tradition, but it refers generally to the inspiring influence or effect that can emanate from any exemplary person. On the other hand, it should be noticed that not all saints are to be imitated. Some are only prayed to as mediators, such as St. Anthony, because they are believed to be close to God (Frijhoff 2002). Others, like St. James, are worshiped by pilgrims who seek their proximity to share a bit of their holiness (Nolan and Nolan 1989). Another category of saints, including ascetics, hermits and recluses, as well as the so-called pillarists such as Simeon the Stylite, is literally inimitable (Cohn 1987).

Let us look a bit closer to the exemplar from the perspective of the inspired. How do I learn from the exemplar? And how do I know at all the value represented by him or her? It seems that we are connected with exemplars in a narrative way. It is through narratives such as legends, stories from novels or films, media reports, or even gossip that we get acquainted with exemplary people. It can be defended that even if we happen to know an exemplar personally, our knowledge of this person has a narrative structure. A narrative structure entails that the corresponding knowledge is focused on an order of logically and chronologically connected events, caused or undergone by “actors,” i.e., real or fictional people, personages who act in the context shaped by the story—to quote a general definition of narrative (Bal 2009; Newton 1995). Similarly, the inspiring value embodied by an exemplar unfolds through the events of a narrative in which the exemplar is involved—the narrative told to us readers, listeners, spectators of the play, the film, or the live event. It is through narratives that we are connected and get acquainted with exemplary figures and the values they demonstrate.

What can be said, on the other hand, of mimesis in the Girardian sense? Does the contagious mimesis of mimetic desire also have a narrative character? Obviously, the object of Girard’s hermeneutical analysis is narrative, as it includes novels, legends, classical myths, biblical stories, etc. But doesn’t he overlook the narrative character of the contagious mimetic desire itself? Mimetic desire seems to be extracted by Girard from the narratives interpreted as a basic feature of human nature on its own, the narratives only

being the source of our knowledge of this human nature. From a straightforward point of view, one could argue that there are also other sources for research on mimetic desire that result in the discovery of this mimetic element in human nature, for example empirical surveys of consumer's behavior at shopping malls. For my part, I would not debate any empirical evidence but, quite the opposite, take Girard's hermeneutical view somewhat further, defending that mimetic desire is in fact contagious *because* of its narrative character. The model in Girard is attractive because he or she represents, embodies, "tells" a story we not only recognize but in which we want to be involved ourselves. Mimetic desire is not only the actual occurrence of a person desiring or already possessing a certain object, but it is also my potential desire and possession of the object, and not only mine. It is the narrative of the actual desiring that makes desiring potential to others, including me.

HERMENEUTICS

The narrative character of both our relationship to the model in Girard and our relationship as moral agents to exemplary figures offers a clue to our question of how to turn a model into an exemplar. Not only our relationships to models and exemplars are narrative, also our knowledge of them is. The narrative character of our knowledge of exemplars and of the values they represent relates to the hermeneutical relationship, already mentioned, with the exemplar and his or her story. The narrative in which the exemplar figures is an appealing or even authoritative text, analogous to classical hermeneutics regarding religious, scriptural, and legal texts. Common to these kinds of texts is their inviting, seducing or even provoking appeal to be read, interpreted, and conquered. There is a special (religious, legal, political, practical, moral) interest to catch their meaning. In relation to such texts and narratives, hermeneutics tries to interpret their meaning though they are not willing to release it easily or directly. There is a historical, cultural, or perhaps hierarchical distance between the interpreter and the meaning sought, for. Hermeneutical interpretation aims to bridge that distance, to get closer to the meaning, to assume it, or appropriate it. In other words, the context in which the value at stake is represented in the exemplar's narrative may be quite different from the context in which, I, the interpreter, am living. Therefore, bridging the distance means *translating* the value at stake from one context to another, from the context recounted in the narrative and the cultural-historical context of the narrative itself, on the one hand, to the actual cultural-historical context of the reader, i.e., the inspired moral agent, on the other (Duyndam 2004).

In hermeneutical terms, the translation from one context to another occurs as application—in Latin: *applicatio* (Gadamer 2003). Taking the inspiration of an exemplar means applying the value represented in his or her narrative to one's own life and actions. Application is a creative process. It includes deliberation, wisdom, and choice, because the values at issue are mostly not handed down to us on a silver platter, clearly and unambiguously. The difference of context, already mentioned, prohibits the application from being a mere imitation. The context of the values demonstrated by Nelson Mandela, for instance, is the situation of a black South African during and immediately after apartheid—quite different from the context of a prosperous white European, to whom Mandela's life may be extremely inspiring. The European, following his inspiration, has to *translate* Mandela's values such as courage and forgiveness from Mandela's black South African context to his or her actual European context. That is, I have to *apply* these values to my own life and actions.

In the hermeneutical view on inspiration presented in this chapter, the application of the inspiring value is motivated by both the interest of the moral agent and the captivating character of the value and its meaning. Against this background, the process of application can hermeneutically be described as follows. The process begins with the experience of being appealed to by the exemplar. The appeal is actually part of the very inspiration of the inspiring exemplar. It indicates a certain familiarity or kinship with the exemplar. The values represented by the exemplar are mine, up to a certain degree. They give me the experience of recognition: "Yes, this is really worthwhile, this is the right thing to do." But the values represented by the exemplar are also still alien to me. I have not yet reached the level of, for example, courage, generosity, justice, or faithfulness as demonstrated by the exemplar. According to Paul Ricoeur, the element of recognition in the hermeneutical application refers to the preceding relation of inclusion—in French: *appartenance* (belonging to)—that is, embracing the pretended autonomous subject and the object pretendedly opposed to it (2002). Building hermeneutics on the legacy of phenomenology, Ricoeur demonstrates that Husserl's intentionality presupposes this preceding relation of inclusion.

Regarding the relation to the exemplar, the element of recognition incorporates the experience that the appeal concerns *me*. The exemplar's inspiring appeal makes me, the moral agent, an associate or an accomplice, not just a spectator. In a way, I am chosen by the exemplar, this rather being an effect coming from the exemplar rather than an act deliberately executed by him or her. Within the inclusive relationship with the exemplar, which has begun with recognition, I the interpreter move toward the exemplar's alien values, trying to reach or to achieve those values. By an opposite metaphor, one may say that I move the exemplar's values to me, trying to acquire them, to appropriate them. Anyhow, both movements are implied in the translation

process, or hermeneutically speaking, the application of the values narratively represented by the exemplar to my life and my actions.

RELATIVE FREEDOM

At this point, we can clarify the difference between mimesis in the contagious sense Girard conceives it and the hermeneutical mimesis grasped here. The difference lies in the application. At first sight, there seems to be no application at all in Girardian mimesis, only imitation by contagion, whereas the application in the hermeneutic interpretative relation to the exemplar implies a more free position toward the exemplar. From a Girardian point of view, however, it could be argued—and it is in fact argued quite often—that mimesis is not the same as imitation, and that if there is an element of imitation in mimesis it does not concern the imitation of persons or behavior, but the imitation of a relationship of interest between the model and an object, for instance desire.¹ Examining the interested relationship more closely, one may say that a model interested in an object may also be considered to be applying a value, albeit mostly unconsciously. The very interestedness of the model in the object displays the importance or the value the object has to the model. It is the model's application that is contagious. Unlike hermeneutical mimesis, which entails translation and application of the value demonstrated by the exemplar into one's own life, the mimetic actor in Girard imitates the model's very application, forgetting his or her own creative possibility of making an authentic application.

The hermeneutical approach to exemplars also recognizes that the value demonstrated, is in fact, an application by the exemplar to his or her life. But unlike imitation of someone else's (the model's) application, hermeneutical application is a creative process, including deliberation, wisdom, and choice. The values to be acquired are not sold out, neither are they detachable from the particular life story and the actions of the exemplar. In fact, they are embodied or incarnated in the exemplar's concrete actions, words and gestures. Moreover, they may be hidden or disguised. And, if present, they may be ambiguous. Consequently, there is a *necessity of application* by the moral agent. There is no other way of understanding the exemplar's narrative than the translating and applying done by the moral agent.

Freedom is implied in the double sense of negative and positive freedom. Negatively, the moral agent stays clear from the "unavoidable" contagion the model spreads (as Girard says), by keeping his or her own choice in the process of application. It is up to me as a moral agent *how* I apply, if at all, the courage inspired in me by the exemplar Mandela. I cannot be forced to apply the value, courage, in a particular way. I may even reject the value. Positively, the exemplar opens to me the very possibility of courage. By

displaying courage in the tough circumstances of his life, Mandela reminds me of the possibility; he invites me to be courageous in my circumstances. The exemplar's effect is liberation in the positive sense of possibility. Of course, the negative and positive freedom of interpretation should not be confused with total or absolute freedom. The freedom of application is a relative freedom—in the literary sense: given by the hermeneutical relationship with the exemplar. The hermeneutical relationship with the exemplar does not free the moral agent from mimetic contagion, completely. The hermeneutical relation is always to be gained, to be struggled for from a resilient position.

Regarding this freedom, it should be remarked, again, that the inspiring and applicable value demonstrated by the exemplar is itself an applied value in the exemplar's narrative. The inspiring effect of the value depends on its application by the exemplar in his or her life and actions as recounted in the narrative. Application does not start with me as a moral agent; my application is an application of an application. Here originates the risk of contagion and mere imitation. One should never forget that application is the key to mimesis, and the key of freedom in mimesis. Only a hermeneutical perspective provides this awareness.

CLOSING REMARKS

I will conclude by specifying some implications of the narrative-hermeneutical approach to mimesis as defended in this chapter.

1. The narrative character of the relationship with the exemplar, as well as the narrative character of the knowledge communicated through this relationship, entails that our acquaintance of the exemplar is limited; in fact it is only partial. Like any personage in a novel, we know only a few things of him or her; we have no complete knowledge of every detail of the exemplar's life and actions. Not only would this be impossible, it would also be undesirable. It is the inevitably abstract and partial image of the exemplar represented in his or her narrative that is inspiring. Too many details would weaken the inspiring effect.
2. However, the selected way the exemplar is represented in the narrative is not aimed at perfection. Although Western culture is highly influenced by the paradigm of all exemplars, Jesus Christ, who is perfect by definition, it enhances the credibility of most exemplars to be *not* perfect. When Nelson Mandela recently tended to become a kind of a saint, biographies were published that included also some dark sides of his personality, which, in fact, contributed to his hero status instead of harming it.² To be credible and inspiring, exemplars need some

- ambivalence, just like real existing people are always ambivalent—a mixture of good and evil.
3. The paradigm of Jesus Christ could also lead to the prejudice that an exemplar must be exemplary in all domains of our lives. Indeed, to a practicing Christian, Jesus is the exemplar of all aspects of his or her life: work, family life, education, friendship, love, etc. Usually, however, an exemplar inspires only some part of my life. In my professorship at the university, for instance, I am inspired by other exemplars than in my being a father for my children, or in my friendship with my friends. An exemplar is not only partial in the sense of a narrative's personage, but also in the sense that the narrative of my own life is itself too complex and multifaceted, and actually too opaque, to be inspired by only one exemplar.

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NOTES

1. But not only desire! In my view, Girardian mimesis concerns any interested relationship, including thinking (e.g., having a view or holding an opinion), giving meaning to something, and even simple perception. Just try: at a touristic site, look very carefully and interested at an arbitrary point, and you will soon notice people coming and standing next to you starting to gaze at the same.
2. Richard Stengel (2009); and Mandela (2010); whereas previous biographies were more like a hagiography, e.g., Nelson Mandela, *The Long Walk to Freedom* (1994).