Unfortunately among the many studies on Girardian thought one notices a gap: in fact, there are no exhaustive studies on the influence – fundamental – that the work of Denis de Rougemont (Neuchâtel 1906 - Geneva 1985) had on the theoretician of the victimary circle. There is only a short article on the subject by the Norwegian scholar Bjørnar Grande¹, and some important references by Silvio Morigi in various articles of his². And yet if you read the works of these authors you cannot help noticing a profound bond, based on objective facts, but which cannot be explained only by these. It’s an intrinsic link, a common philosophical feeling that, although expressed differently, sounds the same. On one hand our aim is, therefore, to isolate that primeval voice we present through their works, on the other to make it reverberate in all its polyphonic richness in the complex contemporary landscape. First of all, therefore, we will deal with the objective evidence of an intellectual relation between Rougemont and Girard, then we will treat the often unconscious assonances between their two thoughts, and finally we will try to show how one can still benefit from the other’s intuitions in order to interpret fully some phenomena of the social universe we live in. It is our opinion, in fact, that the thought of Girard and that of Rougemont complete each other in some way, each filling the gaps of the other, and converging in this way towards the same philosophic result. This achievement has still only been glimpsed, and, although we do not claim to reach it, we will try to get as close to it as possible.

I. Triangular Desire and Amour-passion

Silvio Morigi writes that Mensonge romantique et verité romanesque can be interpreted as an «ingenious transliteration» of Rougemont’s most famous work, L’Amour et l’Occident (1939). Indeed in this first great work of his, Girard quotes Rougemont more than any other author³. We will try, first of all, to see more closely what the brilliant intuition of Rougemont was and then how Girard, in an equally ingenious way, re-interprets it.

L’Amour et l’Occident is based on a structural dichotomy between two basic types of love, called amour-passion and amour-action, the first erotic and the second of agapic origin. As to the amour-passion, Rougemont sees it embodied in its purest form in the great western myth of Tristan and Iseult: these two lovers, he writes, don’t really love each other, they love being in love. «They need one another to burn, but they don’t need each other as they really are»⁴. They do not want the

¹ Bjornar Grande, L’Amore e l’Occidente: Girard e il concetto d’amore di De Rougemont, available online: http://www.bibliosofia.net/files/grande1.htm.
³ Ivi, p. 236.
fulfillment of their love, otherwise the flame that burns in their hearts would be “consumed” in the total presence of the other. If the beloved were always near, they could no longer desire him/her continuously: therefore, if that love is not to be extinguished, they need to be eternally distant, their love must always be thwarted. And when the obstacle to their love is not exterior and objective – like, for instance, King Mark, who claims Iseult as his legitimate wife – they invent new self-imposed ones – like the unsheathed sword that Tristan puts between his body and Iseult’s in the forest, or Tristan’s marriage to the other “white-handed” Iseult. According to Rougemont this kind of love would reflect religious-doctrinal tendencies typical of Cathar-Manichaean dualism: the condemnation of the physical dimension as obstacle to the spiritual ascesis of the “pure”, the subsequent refusal of marriage as iurata fornicatio, the continuous search for fusion with the divine uncreated Light, whose soul sparks would have been imprisoned in the material world. From this point of view Tristan and Iseult’s adulterous love is presented as if it were due to a diabolic and inevitable Fate, from which the lovers cannot escape and against which they can do nothing (the magic potion they drink is the symbol of this fated passion): a passion which, in accordance with its etymon, makes them suffer, and which will fatally reach its climax in both their deaths, because only in death will the lovers overcome that «anguish of being two», the extreme material obstacle to the spiritual fusion in the One-All. Love-passion seems to tell lovers the opposite of what is said in marriage: not “love each other till death separates you” but “desire one another till death unites you”. From this point of view, the ideal of courteous love sung by the troubadours, would be nothing else but an already secularized form of the Cathar conception of earthly life. The troubadours, that is, appear to have absorbed in the French courts of the 12th century an atmosphere steeped in Catharism, and it is this that they sang in their compositions, thereby influencing forever all western literature. In fact Rougemont notes that in our novels «happy love hasn’t a chance». They are always stories of thwarted love that eternally tries to achieve fulfillment without succeeding definitely, and that often leads to the death of the two lovers. Even in its most “secularized” form (as, for instance, in Don Juan), our love literature always gives away its religious origin, always expresses a suffering of the soul that does not find in the world down here the happiness it aspires to.

So much for Rougemont. Now Girard, in Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque, speaks of «triangular desire» in terms that are very similar to those used in L’Amour et l’Occident to describe amour-passion. In fact, as for Rougemont «the same surge that makes us love life hurls us into its negations»5 (since the climax of passionate exaltation is death and the disappearance of the individual personality in the heart of uncreated Nothing), so for Girard «the affirmation of the self leads to the negation of the self»6, since desire is marked by the dynamics of the model-obstacle, which is deeply depersonalizing. In fact, in triangular desire, and more specifically in the passage from external mediation to the internal, any personal concrete form disappears, any real face is covered by a mask which represents the role that each plays: the disciple longs for “fusion” with the model; this that, like a «fake sun», throws a «fallacious splendor» on the object of desire; finally, the object itself that – even when it is a human being – is nothing but a mask of the essential mimetic rivalry, a pretext to “inflame oneself” with violent desire. But in this book of 1961 Girard also mentions the possibility of an authentic desire, “straightforward”, «selon soi», that considers the other in his personal concreteness and irreducibility; which closely recalls what Rougemont writes, in his book in 1939, regarding the amour-action of Christian origin: it takes shape, in fact, as

5 Ivi, p. 396.

"the acceptance of a being for his own sake, limited and real, that one chooses not as a pretext to exalt oneself, but as an incomparable and independent being by one’s side, a need for active love."7

The links between Mensonge romantique and L’Amour et l’Occident are therefore undisputable and can be certainly attested. Girard, we said, quotes Rougemont various times in this his first important work; what it is interesting to note is that Rougemont, in a mirror-like way, quotes Girard in his last wide-ranging work, L’Avenir est notre affaire (1977). «René Girard, - writes the now seventy-year-old Rougemont – in La violence et le Sacré, formulates with fascinating precision the hypothesis of violence as founder of every society through the “sacrificial crisis”, the sentencing to death of the “expiatory victim” that “puts an end to the reciprocal violence»8. It is probably in the light of this respective interest that we must consider the brief exchange of letters between the two authors in 1973 – and which, unfortunately, it has not yet been possible to consult9. However, we can trace back to the causes of Rougemont’s fascination for La violence et le Sacré. As, in fact, the mimetic theory of Girard, expounded for the first time in this volume of 1972, presents profound bonds with the “triangular desire” analysed in Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque – which in turn was based on themes typical of Rougemont – so, in the same way, we can find in almost all the numerous writings of Rougemont a sort of fundamental “mimetic intuition”, almost an unformed and unconscious foreknowledge of that mechanism that Girard illustrated later with scientific rigour in La violence et le Sacré.

To sum up, Girard starts off from Rougemont and ends up at the mimetic theory: Rougemont, instead, starts from love-passion and reaches Girard.

Let’s see in more detail the Girardian elements to be found in the various works of the Swiss philosopher.

2. The myth and the «bloody mistery»

The story of Tristan and Iseulte represents for Rougemont a sort of “founding myth” of amour-passion, a basis on which is built that great «etymology of passion» that is L’Amour et l’Occident.

He himself, years later, would define his method of research «mythanalysis»10, closer to Jungian psychoanalysis rather than Freudian; in this sense, he writes that «the first task of intellectuals, today, is to conduct a critique of collective myths»11. According to Rougemont each myth enables us «to catch at a single glance certain types of constant relationships and to extract them from the jumble of everyday appearances»12, illuminating thus the profound essence of certain human relationships that, although changing with the historical and social context, would always present some constant characteristics, such that can be comprehended within the same hermeneutic frame. More generally, every myth, according to Rougemont, presents some particular formal characteristics:
- it expresses «the rules of behavior of a social or religious group»;

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7 D. de Rougemont, L’Amour et l’Occident, p. 343.
9 Fonds Rougemont, Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire, Neuchâtel, Swiss, doc. num. c. 3.1 f. 1855.
12 D. de Rougemont, L’Amour et l’Occident, p. 62.
- it always proceeds from a «sacred» element, around which the above-mentioned group was formed;
- «it has no author, its origin must be obscure»;
- it presents itself as «a totally anonymous expression of collective realities»;
- its «deepest character» is «the power it acquires over us, generally without our being aware of it»;
- it develops from the need «to hide the origin» of certain facts, to «remove them from criticism».

It is amazing, as well as evident, the parallelism between this concept of Rougemont and the Girardian mimetic theory: for Girard too the myth «expresses the rules of behavior of a social group» (since the moral code and social order derive from the founding sacrifice), «proceeds from a sacred element» (the founding murder), is «the anonymous expression of collective realities» (for Girard even unanimous), and «originate from the need to hides certain facts» (the mimetic violence of human beings).

However we must stress that the analogy between the two authors, here, seems purely formal: in fact according to Rougemont the essential contents that the «semi-light of the myth» reveals and hides symbolically is not the victimary mechanism but rather the will of death that always underlies every declared love passion. The will to give oneself death, as in Tristan, and not to give death to the other as scapegoat, as Girard believes happens in every society founded upon sacrifice. The issue becomes more deep, however, when Rougemont goes on to talk about the passion for war.

As every myth is, after all, nothing but a «lie which a society that wants to save itself uses as defence» since in it are exorcised, through symbolic expression, the impulses of passion it suffers from, so every ethic of war, Rougemont says, is nothing but an attempt to constrain the anarchic and undifferentiating potential violence; violence which, however, re-emerges in its most unformed and destabilizing form, and requires the elaboration of new myths that can constrain it and thus give an illusionary positive social meaning. The French Revolution is an example of this preponderant return of pure passion in war, and it inaugurates the modern myth of Nation through the final sacrificial consummation, the public execution of the king.

«Kept for a long time in the classical forms of war, after the killing of the king, a sacred and ritual action in primitive societies, violence becomes once more something horrible and attractive at the same time. It is the cult of the bloody mystery around which a new community is created: the Nations».

It is a crucial passage for our analysis, for various reasons. First of all, there is a clear reference in it to the thesis of Rudolf Otto, who, defining the archaic sacred as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, will decisively influence Girard in *La violence et le Sacré* – for whom, in the same way, the victim, first killed and then deified, is characterized by his own essential Violence, “fascinating” if it remains transcendent to man, “tremendous” if it threatens to break out

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13 Ivi, p. 64.
14 Ivi, p. 66.
15 Ivi, p. 283.
16 Ivi, p. 318.
once more in society, thus making itself “immanent” to man\textsuperscript{18}. Secondly, because Rougemont finds that the killing of the king represents in primitive societies a «sacred and ritual action», foreshadowing in this way the pages of \textit{La violence et le sacré} dedicated to the ritual death of the kings in the African sacred monarchies\textsuperscript{19}. Furthermore, because the latest Girard will deal with the French revolution in a way completely similar to that here underlined by Rougemont, that is as a decisive moment in the progressive breaking out of an apocalyptic and uncontrollable violence which determined the end of war as institution, and inaugurated at the same time the religion of nationalism\textsuperscript{20}. Finally, it is a decisive passage mainly because Rougemont closely relates war passion to the collective violence towards a victim, and this violence to the establishment of a new social order.

These social-political types of affinity between Rougemont and Girard, for that matter, do not stop at \textit{L'Amour et l'Ocident}, on the contrary, in other works they become even more strong.

Rougemont, in fact, seems to penetrate more and more deeply in the essential relationship that binds the violent “sacred” to the dimension of the undifferentiated crowd. He does so exploring what he calls the «modern sacred» – that is, the «sacred of the state, without magic, but not without theatrical prestige»\textsuperscript{21} – which manifests itself, for instance, in the totalitarianisms of his age. In 1935 he was in Frankfurt as \textit{außerplanmäßiger Lektor} ("extraordinary” lector) of French at the \textit{Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität}; so he had the chance to consider with detachment and «cold passion» the reality of a city of the Third Reich, witnessing also a visit by Hitler. Well, what Rougement grasps of the Nazi regime is that it «is a religion», «the reconstruction of a community around a “sacred” feeling»\textsuperscript{22}. The sound of the drums of the S.S. that, in the night between the 10\textsuperscript{th} and 11\textsuperscript{th} March, announced in advance the arrival of the Führer in town, become for him «the great tam-tam of the tribe that has gone on a rampage», and Hitler’s speech is described as «a sacred ceremony»: «brown crowds» of individuals with «indistinct faces» clamour and «get closer and closer» under «the immense roll of drums», «without saying anything to one another». After no less than eight hours of exhausting wait, during which «nobody becomes impatient or jokes about it», there arrived first Göring and Blomberg, «cheered with joyous heil» and then «a little man dressed in brown, without a hat and with an ecstatic smile»: in that moment «forty thousand arms were raised all together», and «the Episcopalian» advance of Hitler was accompanied by «deafening, rhythmical heil». The people’s eyes are «fixed on that bright point, on that face with the ecstatic smile, and tears are running down their faces»: when Hitler finally arrives on the platform «everything suddenly calmed down. He tended his arm energetically, his eyes turned upwards to the sky – and a muffled \textit{Horst Wessel Lied} rose from the audience». At this point De Rougemont writes:

«I understood.
You cannot understand that if not through a particular sort of shiver and heartbeat – although your spirit remains alert. What I feel now is what must be called sacred horror. I thought I was at a mass meeting, at some sort of political rally. But they celebrate their cult! And it is a liturgy that takes

\textsuperscript{19} See ivi, pp. 150-154.
\textsuperscript{21} D. de Rougemont, \textit{L'Aventure Occidentale de l'Homme}, L'Age de l'Homme, Lausanne 2002 (Albin Michel, Paris 1957\textsuperscript{1}), pp. 95, 67.
\textsuperscript{22} D. de Rougemont, \textit{Journal d'Allemagne}, Gallimard, Paris 1938, p. 70.
place, the great sacred ceremony of a religion of which I am not, and it crushes and pushes me back with a power, even physical, greater than that of all these bodies horribly outstretched. I am alone and they are all together»

It is no coincidence that this last sentence – probably a loan from Dostoevsky’s Notes from the Underground – is also quoted by René Girard in Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque, even if in a different context. He who is alone is the individual isolated from the crowd, the ideal possible victim of the religion of the collective sacred. And the crowd, on the other hand, is mimetic indifference: as Rougemont maintains elsewhere, it «is the ideal place in which one can always say. It was somebody else»25, «it is nothing but each man’s escape from the responsibility of his own act»26, and it presents itself, therefore, like a sort of demonic possession, a Fate of passion that deprives men deceptively of their own freedom. In this sense Rougemont follows the passage from the Gospels about the demons of Jerash27, commented in detail also by Girard in Le bouc émissaire28: if Girard writes that the declaration of the demon-possessed man “I am Legion” is to be read in the sense that «the demon is the (mimetic) crowd»29, Rougemont similarly claims that «Legion is he who always says: it is not me, it is the other! it is the crowd! it wasn’t me!»30, thus making himself an accomplice of unanimous violence, always collective while considered alien. Besides, this structural human camouflage is remarkably traced back and described by Rougemont both on an individual and on a global scale.

First of all, already in the Forties he realized that the media system uses mimetic mechanisms to seize the public opinion. Surprisingly foreshadowing the Girardian analysis of the mimetic desire applied to publicity, Rougemont imagines an interview with a mysterious Mister X, a famous personality (probably inspired by the figure of Kierkegaard) who is asked to be testimonial for the commercial of a drink: «the general idea seems simple. You get people to think: if Mr. X, a distinguished gentleman, drinks this whiskey, if I drink it I will become a distinguished gentleman. Copy the distinguished gentleman and you will be distinguished… Well, in my opinion this short phrase contains a contradiction. Since how is it possible to distinguish oneself by imitating? How can one become distinguished if one strives to resemble?»31. And when Mister X, when interviewed, states: «do like me, all of you be the exception!»32, he expresses in all its vividness the paradox of the mimetic desire: to aim at a supposed authenticity through the imitation of a model, imitation which, however – revealing itself incapable of achieving this goal – transforms itself more and more in expulsive violence, till this violence itself, in turn, becomes the

23 Ivi, pp. 46-49.
26 D. de Rougemont, Les Personnes du Drame, A La Baconnière, Neuchâtel 1945, p. 98.
27 Mc. 5, 1-17.
29 Ivi, p. 269.
30 D. de Rougemont, La part du Diable, p. 65.
32 Ivi, p. 31.
real factor of mimetic undifferentiated. In this sense Girard writes that «the more desire aspires to
difference, the more it generates undifferentiating identity»33. Rougemont grasps this same dynamic
also on a global level, writing, in reference to the events of the Second World War, that «the nations
and their governments do not pose themselves if not opposing each other […]», triggering off these
magnificent movements of “sacred union” in which each in his own language cries “right or wrong,
my country!”»34. After all, war itself is an undifferentiating factor par excellence, and more so a
world war, since (Rougemont writes in eminently Girardian lexis) it «is the state of exception
proclaimed over all the earth, and in the domain of public existence. For us it represents the
equivalent of the Feast of ancient people, it presents its most easily recognizable attributes:
inversion of moral laws (you will kill, you will steal, you will give false testimony with honour);
suspension of right; unlimited expenses; human sacrifices; disguises; marches; the setting loose of
collective passions; temporary ban of individual conflicts»35. All elements that also Girard identifies
as characteristics peculiar to every sacrificial crisis, and to rites aiming at symbolically representing
its essential dynamics.

Finally, as for the relationship between Christianity and all these new «political religions»,
«religions of things buried for thousands of years» (“of the things hidden since the foundation of the
world”, we might say with Girard) «that still claim blood, deaths and propitiating sacrifices»36,
Rougemont finds a basic tension which has never been fully solved. In fact, he writes that «because
of the nature of Christianity and the nature of Buddhism or Hinduism, in the West real life is in
conflict with faith, while in Asia real life is in symbiosis with its religions»37; in fact, while
«metempsychosis, astrology, castes» belong to what «supports and binds itself, that is, are “re-
ligion” in the literal sense of the words»38, in Western history the “sacred” has always been
“ambivalent” towards the Christian doctrine and its effects on the social context: «the “sacred”
belongs to the natural kingdom, to social physics, to the immanence, and for this reason it couldn’t
help rousing diffidence in the Apostles and the first Christians»; however, «it tends to reform itself
spontaneously each time a new society or community establishes itself»39. As if Christianity, in its
essence, were incapable of founding any social order and the “sacred” had to intervene to do this
task which is necessary for civil survival. A necessary evil, we might say. Never, however, a good
sufficient enough for personal realization. The sacred, in fact, is based on the masses, and the
undifferentiated mass is depersonalizing mimicry. That is why Rougemont concisely states that
«you imitate your neighbour when you doubt your own vocation»40, that is, you doubt your own
uniqueness and personal unrepeatability, you doubt that you are called to pursue a specific goal in
which consists our own personal realization.

In this lies the deep personalism of Rougemont, and in this, perhaps, is the greatest
difference with Girard: if in fact Girard of the latest period seems to have doubts about the
possibility of stepping out of the mimetic circle through an authentic “straight” desire, and he even
foreshadows the possibility of salvation from the perverse mechanism of sacrificial violence only

34 D. de Rougemont, Lettres sur la bombe atomique, Brentano’s, New York 1946, pp. 119-120.
35 Ivi, p. 140.
36 D. de Rougemont, La part du Diable, p. 55.
38 D. de Rougemont, L’aventure occidentale de l’Homme, p. 125.
39 D. de Rougemont, The christian opportunity, p. 27.
40 Ivi, p. 83.
through the *imitatio Christi* – that is, by imitating the positive model par excellence –, on the other hand Rougemont will bet for all his life on the possibility of an authentic, “straightforward” relationship with the other, a relationship free from passionate encrustments or mimetic dynamics, a relationship founded upon communal Agape among different people who work together to form a “dialectic harmony”, a «fertile tension» in which each one finds his own personal realization. The model remains Christ, but the *imitatio Christi* does not mean the spasmodic attempt to fuse oneself with Him (as in the dynamic of triangular desire as regards the model), rather primarily to grasp in the Incarnation an appeal to open oneself up to «the other, and at the same time to one’s own true self»\(^41\).

«The model of every human being is given by the Incarnation of Christ son of God into Christ son of Mary – Jesus Christ being “real man and real God”. As a consequence, every convert, recreated by the heavenly Love, ends up becoming, in the imitation of Jesus-Christ, true vocation and true individual, that is: a distinct person but at the same time placed in relation (reliée) from that which distinguishes it»\(^42\).

The difference between Rougemont and Girard, on this point, can result even clearer if we look at their two different conceptions of love: if Girard writes that the «positive mutuality» of the Agape resembles the «negative one» of the violent doubles, since «it is always the same type of undifferentiating», and therefore love is basically the mimetic double of violence\(^43\), Rougemont instead writes that love-action «is acceptance of the creature, the will to accept the other just as he is, in his singularity. […] The Agape recognizes his neighbour, and loves no longer as a pretext for exaltation, but just for the way he is in the reality of his anguish and his hope»\(^44\).

That is why, as we said at the beginning, we think that the thought of Rougemont and that of Girard could enrich one another in the interpretation of numerous phenomena of contemporary life: if in Girard, for instance, the theme of interpersonal love (examined in depth by Rougemont) remains extrinsic compared with the dynamic of victimary mechanism, in Rougemont, on the other hand, the study of some phenomena of social violence often remains superficial compared with the acute analysis of Girard.

But love-passion and mimetic violence, unfortunately, often go arm in arm. Therefore, to show how Rougemont and Girard can complete one another, we will try to use their theoretical keys to interpret two novels in which the myth of love and that of sacrifice appear inseparably bound. Two novels, furthermore, profoundly different in the result of these these same dynamics: we refer to *The Perfume* (*Das Parfum*) by Patrick Süskind and *Till We Have Faces* by Clive Staples Lewis.

### 3. The faces of love

The Perfume begins with a smell and ends with a smell. The smell in the novel is symbol of mimetic undifferentiating: men are all the same because, after all, everyone smells. In 18\(^{th}\) century Paris the king smelt just like the errand boy, the queen like the laundry maid, the priest like the aristocrat: the smell is the sin of men, their carnal materiality (as the character father Terrier


correctly guesses). But a man is born who carries the stigma of absolute difference. He has no smell, and at the same time he has an unlimited sense of smell. Jean-Baptiste Grenouille is elected since birth as potential sacrificial victim, half demon and half god: he is born among rotten fish (almost foreshadowing the nature of stinking fish) and he is continuously expelled from the bays and the orphanages in which he is taken, since he is believed to be «possessed by the devil»\(^45\) (because he has no smell), and at the same time miraculously able, like a god, to see beyond walls and foresee the arrival of strangers (actually thanks to his hyper-developed sense of smell). There are also two other unmistakable victimary marks that Grenouille bears: first of all he «has a misshapen foot that makes him limp»\(^46\), a fact which is without explanation if not from a Girardian point of view (since the circumstance is not decisive in any of the episodes of the novel); furthermore, in the cornerstone moment when he begins his career as perfumer, he has on his shoulder a goatskin to perfume for an aristocratic Parisian lady. On that very occasion Grenouille proves to the profumer Baldini that he can perfectly copy the famous essence *Love and Psyche* by Pélissier. The name of the perfume, as we shall see further on, is of fundamental importance for our interpretation. In any case, from this point onwards, the novel presents a perfect sacrificial escalation: first Grenouille falls seriously ill, and he is «lapidated like a martyr» by thousands of pustules\(^47\), then he decides to run away from people (his real “disease”) and he retires to a narrow mountain gorge for seven years, where he becomes more and more hunchbacked and isolated in himself. This self-expulsion of his, however, proves a failure: Grenouille practices some diabolical «spiritual exercises»\(^48\), in which, compounding and decomposing the odours stored in his memory, he imagines he is the God of innumerable worlds that he creates and destroys at will, and in which men offer him sacrifices whose odour highly pleases him; until he once realizes the fundamental fact: he himself has no odour, and as «everything that exists has a smell», it is as if he didn’t exist.

To prove to himself that he does exist, he then decides to return among people, so that they may recognize him: new Zarathustra, he goes down from the mountain and terrorizes people because of his monstrous aspect, until he meets the Marquis of Taillade-Espinasse. This man had theorized the existence in the earth of a «lethal fluidum» which leads all things to death and to putrefaction, and the subsequent need to eat and surround oneself with elements as aery as possible to purify one’s spirit from material mortality. Grenouille accepts to act as guinea pig for the experiments of the Marquis, in exchange for a conspicuous wage, until he manages to steal into the laboratory of a local profumer: here he makes himself the perfume, or rather the smell, of man, the smell of mankind, so that the people may accept him, «offspring of the devil, as man among men»\(^49\). The experiment works, and Grenouille throws himself «among the multitudes»\(^50\): he decides to go to Grasse, city famous for its tradition in the art of perfume-making, to discover new techniques in the extraction of odorous essences. But here he comes across a unique odour, irresistible, a perfect perfume, that of a girl he immediately falls in love with; once before, when he was young in Paris, he had been attracted by the perfume of a woman, and he had killed her to possess her essence. Now he excogitates a more systematic plan: while waiting for the girl of Grasse to become mature, and therefore also her perfume, becoming even more attractive, Grenouille kills other young

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\(^{46}\) Ivi, p. 26.

\(^{47}\) Ivi, p. 105.

\(^{48}\) Ivi, p. 130.

\(^{49}\) Ivi, p. 159.

\(^{50}\) Ibidem.
women, all virgins, and he extracts their perfume so that, in due time, he will be able to set in it the
perfect perfume of young Laure. The city is therefore panic-stricken: a situation of mimetic crisis is
created, in which everyone accuses everybody else of the murder of the virgins; they all mistrust
one another; everyday life is suspended, «nobody works anymore»; there is even an incestuous
element, represented by Laure’s father, Richis. He is irresistibly attracted to the angelic beauty of
his daughter, and he is therefore convinced that the final aim of the mysterious murderer is to kill
exactly her. Richis represents the mimetic double of Grenouille: he, writes Süskind, feels «regard
for the murderer», regard which «reverberates also upon himself as if from a clear mirror», since «if
he too, Richis, had been a murderer and had been obsessed by the same passionate ideas of the
murderer, he would not have been able to act differently, and like the murderer he would have
risked everything to crown his folly’s work with the splendid, incomparable Laure».

It is no chance that, when Richis takes his daughter out of town, seemingly to save her, in the eyes of the
people this appears to be an «archaic sacrifice»: that same night, in a village inn, Grenouille, who
had followed Richis and Laure, manages to accomplish his murder. He snatches Laure’s perfect
essence from her naked body, thanks to the techniques learnt in Grasse, and, combining it with the
odours of the other girls, he makes himself a perfect love potion, irresistible for all men. But he is
found out by the public authorities and sentenced to death for the repeated murders. Thus he is
exposed before the inhabitants of Grasse who in one unique «mass of eyes» shout all together «we
want him!».

The day of the collective rite finally arrives, the «great feast day» on which all the
inhabitants, in their best clothes, rally to witness the public crucifixion of Grenouille. On this «day
of liberation», as it is called, the crowd circles the scaffold, and waits for the arrival of the victim
Grenouille, who finally arrives in a carriage, like an important person. Up to here all the elements of
the novel seem to foreshadow a mythical sacrificial conclusion, following the theory of Girard: yet
the death of Grenouille is postponed. In fact, when he steps out of the carriage, he sprinkles himself
with the love perfume he had created, and thus the «miracle» happens: suddenly everybody is sure
that Grenouille is innocent, and while before they would have lynched him, now they love him from
the depth of their hearts. All the onlookers are unanimously «melted in the spirit», in a «unique
amorphous flux» of devotion towards the God of love Grenouille, personification of Eros. Thus
violence is immediately transformed into its double, erotic passion: people start undressing in an
orgiastic Bacchanalia of undifferentiated chaos. «They started to copulate in impossible positions
and couplings, the old man with a virgin, the labourer with the wife of the lawyer, the apprentice
with the nun, the Jesuit with the freemason’s wife, all at random, as it came. The air was heavy with
the sickly-sweet sweat of pleasure and full of the cries, the grunts and the moaning of ten thousand
human beasts. It was infernal».

Grenouille feels total contempt for that shapeless mass of flesh and lust and he realizes he
has failed: in the same moment in which he is truly an omnipotent God, he is also the loneliest
person. He is alone firstly before himself: in fact, the miraculous perfume «could do everything but

51 Ivi, p. 228.
52 Ivi, p. 209.
53 Ivi, p. 212.
54 Ivi, pp. 231-232.
55 Ivi, p. 234.
56 Ivi, p. 236.
57 Ivi, p. 243.
it could not make him smell his own odour»\(^{58}\). Thus, «condemned to never know who he was»\(^{59}\), he decides to kill himself: he returns to where he was born, what was once a fish market has become a cemetery (equally smelly), and at night, in front of a circle of desperate people and prostitutes around a fire, he drenches himself with the magic perfume. For this he is taken to be an angel: the people leave the fire and form a circle around him, they go close to him, undress and possess him. «Everyone wanted to touch him, everyone wanted a part of him, a small feather, a wing, a spark from his marvelous flame. They tore his clothes from his body, his hair, his skin, they tore him to pieces, digging their nails and teeth into his flesh […] When the cannibals at the end of the meal met around the fire, nobody said a word […] They were extraordinarily proud. For the first time they had made a gesture of love»\(^{60}\).

We could sum up this ending to Süskind’s gloomy novel in a vivid expression that Lewis makes one of his characters say in *Till We have Faces*: «some say that to love and to devour are the same thing»\(^{61}\). It is said by the priest of Ungit, archaic and impersonal divinity of an imaginary kingdom called Glome, where reigns a barbaric king with three daughters, Orual, Redival and Istra. The last one, called Psyche by the Greek preceptor of the three maidens, is chosen for her uncommon beauty (and therefore also “outside the community”) as victim for the ritual of the Great Sacrifice, which will bring back peace and prosperity to Glome. The kingdom, in fact, is devastated by famine, pestilence, drought, and the invasion of ferocious lions. The situation is, in short, the paradigmatic one of a sacrificial crisis: «We must find the one who will bear the curse», says the Priest, «and must die according to the rite of the Great Sacrifice»\(^{62}\); this consists in taking the victim to the sacred tree of the Mountain, where the sacred Beast lives, and there tie her and leave her as bride for the god, the son of Ungit (or, if the victim is a man, for Ungit herself). «The victim of the Great Sacrifice must be perfect», the priest continues, «in fact, in the sacred language, a man offered to Ungit is said husband of Ungit, and a woman, bride of the son of Ungit. Both are called the meal of the Beast. And when the Beast is Ungit she lies with the man, and when it is her son, he lies with the woman. In any case the act is always that of devouring…»\(^{63}\). The Sacrifice is accomplished and its effects arrive shortly after: seemingly miraculously, the harvests are good once again, and the disease is eradicated. But Lewis says that, through the words of the Greek preceptor, the truth is different: the people, because of the Sacrifice, trusts its king once more, has found its own identity once again and faith in its own means, and so it reacted positively to adversity. The point is clear when the lions return: instead of losing trust in the goddess Ungit, which with the Sacrifice should have saved the people of Glome from new invasions by ferocious beasts, the king and the people get excited and go off on a great hunt. At this point Orual takes advantage of the men’s absence from the palace to go to the Mountain and look for her sister Psyche, to give her a decent burial if nothing else. But she finds her still alive and happy to have become the bride of the God: Psyche tells her sister that she lives in beautiful palace with her husband, but Orual cannot see either him or the splendid home. She therefore believes her sister to be mad, and she has the definite proof when Psyche tells her that she cannot look her husband in the face because he has ordered it so. Convinced that she will make her sister sane again, Orual forces her to look at the face of the

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\(^{58}\) Ivi, p. 255.

\(^{59}\) Ivi, p. 256.

\(^{60}\) Ivi, pp. 258, 259.


\(^{62}\) Ivi, p. 45.

\(^{63}\) Ivi, p. 47.
alleged god, threatening to kill herself if she didn’t. Psyche accepts and so, by looking at the god, provokes his rage. He leaves his bride alone, sentencing her to exile.

At this point the narrative moves to Orual: she receives a divine revelation in which she sees a man surrounded by light who tells her the sad fate of her sister. Thus Orual, ugly since birth, finds out that she is ugly also in her soul: once her father dies, she decides to hide her physical ugliness behind a veil, and her moral one behind the appearance of a wise warrior queen. The veil, furthermore, strengthens her fame: a myth spreads about a beautiful queen, whose face would blind anyone who saw it, or it is narrated of a queen with no face, almost a semi-goddess. Deep down in her soul Orual nurtures a growing hatred for the gods that make fun of men and uses them like puppets without ever revealing their true mysterious purposes. She writes down her accusation against them, until she falls seriously ill and has visions, half dream and half real: in one of these visions she arrives in the kingdom of the dead, where she meets the Greek preceptor once again. Convinced now that Greek wisdom is further from the divine reality than the sacred cult of the Priest, he shows Orual the feats that Psyche had to face during her exile in order to find her lost husband. The last of the feats consists in going down into the infernal kingdom to get the casket of Beauty of the Queen of Shadows and then give it to Ungit. In that instant Orual sees Psyche coming towards her with the casket and she finally understands: she herself is Ungit, that shapeless goddess without face, or with «countless faces», she herself wanted to jealously possess her sister from the start. That was why she was so angry with the god of the Mountain: the god had taken her sister away from her. Plainly speaking, the god of the Mountain for Lewis represents the Christian God that, once we abandon ourselves to him unconditionally, makes man move out of the religion of the archaic sacred (represented by Ungit) and enter the true faith, and at the same time the true self. To do so, however, Christianity must get into the furrow of the archaic sacred and so fill it: we could say, with Girard of the last period re-interpreted by Morigi, that the sacred archaic «delineates in absence», and therefore foreshadows, Christian fulfillment, in the same way the concave prefigures the convex of which it is the mould. «Let’s say that the Ungit in each one of us must breed the son of Ungit and die in childbirth – or change», writes Lewis, as if to say that Christianity, with Incarnation and Resurrection, describes a dynamic of death of the self (and of death of one’s own natural self, bound to mimetic violence) and at the same time of rebirth to one’s real self, to one’s real Person, to one’s own face. That is why, in the ending of the novel, when Psyche is re-united with the God, looking at her Orual states: «I had never seen a real woman, before».

Lewis’ novel, as has certainly already been noted, draws from the fable Love and Psyche by Apuleius. Lewis himself called it a “myth retold” (it is the subtitle of the work): retold, we might say, from a Christian point of view. Actually, while in Apuleius the God of love is the Greek Eros, in Lewis he is transformed in the Christian Agape. Thus the new dimension of love opens up to the reality of the other incarnate, to the kingdom of the neighbour, to the personal «face» that, for Rougemont, is the key feature of every authentic love-action.

It is not so in Süskind: the character of Grenouille stays anchored to the dimension of love-passion, reaching out to a spiritual ascesis, always invoked and irreparably doomed to death. The first perfume he creates, or rather, paradigmatically “imitates”, is Love and Psyche: but this time the nature of this “love” is not Agape, but rather Eros, that sees in the other nothing but a pretext to get excited. Grenouille, says the author, «was not interested at all in pleasure, when pleasure consisted in anything different from pure immaterial odour»: he doesn’t fall in love with Laure but with her

64 Girard’s expression is dessiner en creux. See S. Morigi, Dessiner en creux. Il sacro e la Croce, introduction to AA.VV. Religioni, laicità, secolarizzazione.

65 C. S. Lewis, Till we have faces, p. 293.

66 P. Süskind, Das Parfum, p. 127.
perfume; he does not want to possess her body but her intangible essence absolue; «he wanted to strip off her perfume like a skin, and make it his», writes Süskind67. Therefore, when he finally kills her and extracts her perfume, he is not at all attracted to her naked body lying on the bed: «for him Laure no longer existed as a body but only as a perfume without a body. And that was what he kept with him»68. Grenouille despises the body, even his own, and he basks in the perfumed kingdom of his soul: and yet he is always unsatisfied. The spiritual asceticism of this Tristan of smell winds over two basic stages. First of all, the symbolic asceticism on the solitary Mountain, far from the stink of men and their hideous earthly finiteness; then the encounter with the Marquis of Taillade-Espinasse, whose doctrine of the earthly fluidum letale represents a sort of new Catharism, in which the flesh and all that is “down here” is condemned while everything that is spiritual, immaterial, ethereal is exalted. In a word, perfume becomes the symbol of the spirit unfulfilled by carnal existence, trapped in the prison of matter: and Grenouille is he who has finally «set the aroma free from matter, has made aroma spiritual, has discovered pure aroma»69. In the end he succeeded in creating the potion of Eros, under whose torments all the passionate lovers of history enjoy and suffer, starting from Tristan and Iseulte. But he, he himself, knows that this love is a deceit, he knows that this Eros is nothing but a mask of death and violence. There is nothing real behind the illusion of love, there is no personal face: Eros is the Kingdom of mimetic undifferentiating. Pure perfume grants a fleeting fulfillment: it does not lead to happiness but only to the infernal Bacchanalia. So, disillusioned by his own illusion, Grenouille abandons himself to death: his is a sacrifice without any Resurrection, because he is not a real person. «He had disguised himself with the best perfume in the world, but under this mask he had no face»70. Besides, as Orual states in Lewis’ novel: «how can God meet us face to face as long as we won’t have a face?»71.

In conclusion, what we have tried to do is to pinpoint an essential bond between the mimetic violence thematized by Girard and the love-passion analyzed by Rougemont. We have looked for traces of this bond, consistently with the methodology followed by both these two authors, in two great “myth-poietic” novels of the Twentieth century in which such dynamics appear simultaneously present and inseparable, even though different in their outcome. We do not in the least claim our research to be completed and definite, but it is rather a forerunner. Our idea is that Girard, by putting on the same level love and violence because of their undifferentiating character, does not study in depth the character of this “love”: maybe his thesis applies only to love-passion, that is, the Eros of which Rougemont has glimpsed the ambiguous and obscure nature (without clarifying it any further in a Girardian sense, linking it to mimetic violence), while it cannot be applied to Christian Agape, that is, the form of love that lives in action, that realizes itself (also carnally) in tending towards the beloved other, in his unique and unrepeatable reality, in the creatural finiteness of his incarnate face.

(translated by Antonietta Nardella)

67 Ivi, p. 178.
68 Ivi, p. 225.
69 Ivi, p. 60.
70 Ivi, p. 245.
71 C. S. Lewis, Till we have faces, op. cit., p. 282.