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Mimetic Desire

Deceit, Desire, and the Novel (1961) represents Girard's first attempts to articulate a concrete theorization of desire through a detailed reading of literature. Aligning himself with neither psychoanalysis, Hegelianism, nor Spinozism, Girard instead claimed to have found an incipient logic of interpersonal relations in a kind of *literary* work that he termed 'novelistic' [*romanesque*]. For him, this literature possessed potentially far greater theoretical and critical resources – greater hermeneutic and heuristic capacities – than most of those theories usually employed to examine *it*. Girard even went so far as to argue for a kind of inversion between literary criticism and its objects: instead of using theories such as psychoanalysis to understand Proust or Dostoevsky, he advised us, no doubt provocatively, to do the opposite: to use the critical insights of Proust or Dostoevsky to understand Freud.

It is the purpose of this chapter to introduce Girard's theorization of 'mimetic' desire and the notions of 'internal' and 'external' mediation; to examine his theory of the novelistic and the romantic literary works; to outline his accounts of psychopathology – of 'pseudo-masochism' and 'pseudo-narcissism'; to place into a broader historical frame some of his reflections on mimesis; and, finally, to elucidate the main features of the nature of Girard's engagement with psychoanalysis. We turn, now, to the notion of 'mimetic desire'.

Desire and mimesis

What is undoubtedly most distinctive about Girard's theorization of desire is that it is based on the notion of imitation, which he refers to by invariably invoking the Greek term – 'mimesis'. Pointing to the obvious centrality of imitative behaviour in human social and cognitive development, Girard makes the (fairly uncontentious) point that, without the ability to copy the behaviour and speech of others – what he calls a 'mimesis of apprenticeship' [*mimétism primaire*] – human socialization, our capacity to inhabit a culture, would be impossible (*TH* 7/15).[1] Socialization and enculturation are contingent on learning 'how to do things' through detailed processes of tacit and explicit imitation; it is, indeed, exceedingly difficult to think of areas of human development that would be able to function without this dimension.

To this, Girard adds – somewhat more contentiously – that human *desire* is also constitutionally imitative. In other words, mimesis, as Girard sees it, involves not simply representation and other forms of cultural memory – it incorporates acts of and intentions towards *acquisition*; here Girard speaks of a 'mimesis of appropriation' [*une mimésis d'appropriation*] (*TH* 7–10/15–18). Girard describes desire as mimetic because of what he sees as the overriding importance of imitation in the constitution of our desires; fundamentally, he suggests, we learn what to desire from copying the desires of others: 'To say that our desires are imitative or mimetic is to root them neither in their objects nor in ourselves but in a third party, the *model* or *mediator*, whose desire we imitate in the hope of resembling him or her' (*RU* 144).[2]

But here it is important to note, however briefly, reservations that Girard has about the term 'desire' [*désir*] itself and the kinds of misleading associations it is likely to invoke. Firstly, he distances his own thinking from psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the sexual origin and character of desire (*TH* 345/367). Secondly, he warns against those (usually) philosophical approaches to human desire that figure it as thoroughly discontinuous with the kinds of natural propensities exhibited in the animal kingdom. Girard argues that, although mimetic desire as such is distinctly human, this distinctiveness should be seen as emerging from non-human capacities for imitation. Ethological studies have repeatedly tended to suggest that non-human animals have mimetic propensities that are grafted onto more basic needs and appetites (*TH* 283–4/307–8).[3]

Here it is important to note that, although animal needs for hydration, shelter, rest, and nutrition persist at the human level, they do not, in themselves, constitute 'desire' *per se*. Any of these needs may serve as pretexts for the formation of desire, but, by themselves, are not sufficient for it.[4] Needs require satisfaction, but the ways in which they are satisfied take their cues from how *others* meet those same needs; that is, the indeterminate set of objects that might be said to correspond to a (putative) need are invariably transformed and given concrete form by what others desire (or at least what others *behave as if* or *say* they desire). But whereas those drives and needs that are grounded in the biological life of a being are capable of being satisfied – however temporarily – *desire* can emerge in the absence of any genuine appetite at all: 'Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what' (*VS* 146/217). This constitutive indeterminacy of desire, Girard argues, takes its cues from others, who mediate desire for us: 'We desire what others desire because we imitate their desires.'[5] Grafted onto the needs and appetites of animal life – but underdetermined by them – desire is in large part an *act of the imagination*, involving fascinations with objects and figures that possess not only use values, but *symbolic* values as well – rivalries for symbolically mediated objects made possible by symbolic institutions (*TH* 93/102; cf. 283–4/307–8). What Girard offers us here is an eminently parsimonious hypothesis about human subjectivity; however, as Sandor Goodhart warns us, the 'simplicity and elegance of this theory should not blind us to the enormity of its explanatory power.'[6] Precisely of what this explanatory power consists we shall consider presently, but first, a few further clarifications are in order.

Girard's basic hypothesis concerning desire is most aptly schematized by the triangle; it is not, in other words, a theoretical schema which figures desire as a straight line of force which extends between (desiring) subject and (desired) object, but a complex of lines running from the subject to the mediator of desire and back again.[7] The object is desired neither because of its intrinsic value (like, say, the Freudian 'maternal object') nor as a result of being consciously 'invested in' or 'chosen' by the will of an autonomous subject – it is desired because the subject (consciously or nonconsciously) imitates the desire of another (an Other), real or imaginary, who functions as a model for that desire. For Girard, then, desire is *le désir selon l'Autre* [desire following, or according to, the Other], rather than *le désir selon soi* [desire according to one's own

unique, intrinsic preferences]: it is neither autonomous nor innate (*DD* 5/13).[8]

The epistemology of literature, or, literature as epistemology?

Girard contends that his ideas concerning desire are the result of a detailed engagement with literature. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, he discusses what he sees as an incipient logic, concretely if not formally expressed, in certain nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European novels. In selected works of Flaubert, Stendhal, Proust, Cervantes, and Dostoevsky, Girard detects a highly lucid problematic of interpersonal relations that emphasizes the primacy of imitation and rivalry. In Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, for instance, the author informs us that Emma's desires were learnt by reading while she was at convent school; her models are the romantic heroines typical of the trashy fiction that she devoured (*DD* 5/14). Another example is the character Marcel, in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, who we are told is decidedly underwhelmed by the performance of the famous actress Berma until he hears her praised socially, first by M. de Norpois and then by a reviewer in *Le Figaro*. After this, Marcel is convinced that Berma's performance had been everything that he had expected it would be (*DD* 37/43).

In suggesting that certain literary works are able to provide us with an array of cogent critical tools, Girard is firmly committed to the idea that literary criticism and cultural theory need not always borrow all of their conceptual resources from established disciplines – from semiotics, philosophy, psychoanalysis, or sociology. Rather, he argues that it is possible to find in literary works themselves implicit or half-explicit analytical tools and scenes that criticism itself can utilize and further systematize. And yet, here one should be careful about what is being asserted: Girard's claim concerning the epistemological or cognitive veracity of literature should *not* been seen as signifying the victory of a certain critical intellectual mode over the literature about which it contemplates – he is not of the view that the novel represents a degraded mode of abstraction which merely serves the purpose of illustrating 'theses' (that would perhaps be better expressed in a critical idiom). Girard's point is not that literature is somehow bad (or even latent) theory. Literary theory, rather, is – or at least should be – *an extension of its object*; and its formal rigour should be undertaken out of respect for the

rigour, again, of the literature it contemplates: 'Literary interpretation should be systematic because it is the continuation of literature' (*DD* 3). Again, Girard argues that, instead of applying modern theories to interpret modern novels, we should criticize the former in light of the latter, once their 'theoretical voice has become explicit'; therefore, his – and our – relation to novelistic works, he claims,

> cannot be defined as 'critical' in the usual sense. We have more to learn from them than they have to learn from us; we must be students in the most literal sense of the word. Our conceptual tools do not come up to their level; instead of 'applying' to them our ever changing methodologies, we should try to divest ourselves of our misconceptions in order to reach the superior perspective they embody. (*DB* x–xi)

In light of remarks such as the one above, it should perhaps come as little surprise that contemporary novelists of the likes of Roberto Calasso and Milan Kundera have shown far more than just a passing interest – and more than a begrudging respect – for Girard's thinking.[9] But Girard is doing far more than demonstrating a finely honed capacity for flattery; as we will see, he is actually substantially doing what he proclaims to be doing. In any case, his compliments are not haphazardly distributed; the literary detection of the primacy of imitation in interpersonal relations is not common to the novel *as a genre*. Girard distinguishes between those works which function to demystify, or 'demythify', this interpersonal (mimetic) relation by exposing how the mediation of desire operates – *romanesque* [novelistic] works – and those novels which he believes bolster notions of desire *selon soi – romantique* [romantic] works (*DD* 16–17/24–5). Further, the *romans romanesques* is not the domain of a select group of novelists; authors such as Dostoevsky, who feature heavily in Girard's discussions of the *romanesque* work, produced novels which do not fit into this category. Nor is the novelistic genre a purely eighteenth- or nineteenth-century phenomenon: it includes, among others, works by Shakespeare, Albert Camus, Victor Hugo, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Paul Valéry, and Virginia Woolf.

For Girard, one of the signal characteristics of the romantic novel is the way in which it valorizes – through its characters, and their attitudes and actions – all instances of 'originality' and 'spontaneity', properties which are depicted in such works as indicators of personal superiority. In terms of its 'geometry', the romantic con-

strual of desire is (again) that of a straight line running between a desiring subject and (an intrinsically valuable) desired object. For Girard, the *romans romanesques*, contrary to the romantic work, shows that the ground of desire doesn't reside in any one subject: it is, rather, always *between* them. And, in so doing, it throws into question the intrinsic desirability of the object, recasting its value as a product of the interpersonal – or, as he prefers, 'interdividual' [*interdividuelle*] – relation.

As such, Girard's literary theory is somewhat idiosyncratic, given that his approach to criticism relies neither on theory (extratextual material) nor on purely formalist modes of analysis (which restricts itself to intratextual material) – it is, rather, *inter*textual.[10] Girard is, in other words, concerned with the author's own work at different stages, and so compares individual works with others and places each in a writer's *oeuvres complètes*. He has constantly – and no doubt controversially – dealt with what he believes is a certain kind of 'conversion' undergone by the author as revealed through the development of the writer's *oeuvre*, as well as the transformations of central characters at the end of most novelistic works.[11] For Girard, the conclusion to the *romanesque* work consists largely in the repudiation of what he calls 'metaphysical' desire, the 'pseudo-deification' of pride, substituting a new mode of interpersonal relations not predicated on the slavish but largely unwitting imitation of others (*DD* 307/305–6). In his work on Dostoevsky Girard argues that this 'novelistic truth' [*vérité romanesque*] is well encapsulated by the narrative transformation of the main character in *The Brothers Karamazov*, whose emergence from the Dostoevskyan 'underground' well captures the novelistic 'resurrection', a late and desperate emergence from the 'romantic lie' [*mensonge romantique*] (*RU* 106–42/104–35).

Dostoevsky's novels, in other words, represent stages in a cognitive-existential experience. As such, the author systematically undermines his earlier works: acts which are portrayed as heroic and expressive of a superior individualism in his first novels are critiqued in later ones, beginning, Girard argues, with *Notes from the Underground* and *The Eternal Husband*. The later works depict the same situations as the earlier ones, but the motives of the characters and the significance of their actions have been significantly reframed by the author; attitudes and behaviours presented in the earlier works as worthy of imitation are later shown to stem from conflict and *ressentiment*, and are, for this reason, rejected. For Girard, this narrative transformation, a transformation whereby

desire itself is recast, isn't simply expressive of authorial 'cynicism' or disillusionment: it is better knowledge. In Dostoevsky's later works 'passion' as such is not absent – what is absent is the depiction of passion as something spontaneous and individual. Equally, then, such passion is something that Dostoevsky makes the object of his *satire*, not the object of his solemn endorsement (*RU* 62/68).[12]

Yet, despite repudiating 'metaphysical' desire and the unwitting imitation of others, the recurring Dostoevskyan question of whether a person – through either conceit or great acts of heroism – can attain total independence from his or her peers, from their mediators of desire, is answered by him in the negative. For (Girard's) Dostoevsky, the heroism so typical of romanticism is merely the symptom of a more slavish servitude expressed as self-possessed 'pride'. Pride, in this sense, is evinced by those pervasive forms of 'negative imitation': the pursuit of individual distinction by doing what others *don't* do. The most obvious paradox of negative imitation is that it is still thoroughly entangled with the Other – the acquisition of putative 'difference' demands a meticulous observation of others (and perhaps even their approval) so that the romantic subject can distinguish himself or herself *from* them. Thus, fierce individualism leaves the mimetic relation unscathed and even bolsters its obfuscation. This 'romantic individualism', for Girard, is one of the archetypal expressions of cultural as well as literary modernity – a condition which intensifies the mimetic relationship by denying its existence and in so doing exacerbates its pernicious effects. As Girard says, 'the effort to leave the beaten paths forces everyone inevitably into the same ditch' (*DD* 100/105).[13]

Girard sees parallel comprehensions and critiques of romanticism (and even philosophical existentialism) in the work of a host of other novelists and a diverse range of cultural *milieux*. For instance, for Girard, the focus of Camus's *La Chute* [*The Fall*] is not so much some putative 'fictional universe' as his own previous work. The author, through Clamence, critiques Meursault – the central protagonist in *The Stranger* – for his rampant but unacknowledged *ressentiment*; Camus reveals the rigorous homologies between the existentialist anti-hero and the pose of coquette (*DB* 9–35).[14] The existentialist 'individual' is no less romantic (and certainly no less a hero) for his rejection of worldly goods and approval. Archetypally incarnated in Camus's Meursault and Jean-Paul Sartre's Roquentin (of *The Stranger* and *Nausea* respectively), this new romanticism remains even more in denial than its literary precursors, not simply for denying emulation but for *denying the*

heroic quest itself. Predictably, it was, in fact, a more pernicious form of subjection (*DD* 270–2/271–3) – what Anthony Wilden has called a 'Jansenism of the anti-hero' – something that Camus himself was eventually able to see.[15]

Having stated some of the basic hermeneutic strands of Girard's approach to literature and his assertion of its cognitive import, we now turn to consider his theorization of mimetic desire and the dynamics of rivalry in more detail, initially as these notions appear and are developed in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*.

Mimesis and the dynamics of rivalry: internal and external mediation

Girard begins *Mensonge romantique* by citing a section from Miguel de Cervantes' satire *Don Quixote de la Mancha* in which the hero, Don Quixote, instructs his page on following the path of knighthood. The Don tells Sancho Panza that he himself strives to emulate those 'knight errants' of chivalric romances; and at the apex of this hierarchy of knight errants stands Amadis of Gaul, who is, for Quixote, the very epitome of chivalry:

> I think . . . that, when a painter wants to become famous for his art he tries to imitate the originals of the best masters he knows. . . . Amadis was the pole, the star, the sun for brave and amorous knights, and we others who fight under the banner of love and chivalry should imitate him. Thus, my friend Sancho, I reckon that whoever imitates him best will come closest to perfect chivalry. (Cited in *DD* 1/11)

For Girard, the Don 'has surrendered to Amadis the individual's fundamental prerogative: he no longer chooses the objects of his own desire – Amadis must choose for him. The disciple pursues objects which are determined for him, or at least seem to be determined for him, by the model of all chivalry. We shall call this model the *mediator* of desire' (*DD*, 1–2/11–12). Girard points out how Quixote's adventure is essentially mimetic – how his imitation of Amadis transforms his judgements, his actions, and even his vision. The Don's imitation of the great knight knows few limits. He decides that he, like his model, must also have a beloved to whom he can give himself totally, and through whom he can endure the agonies of romantic involvement. Quixote chooses an undistin-

guished local farm girl, Aldonza Lorenza – although his desire, mediated through Amadis, transforms her into his hero's lover Dulcinea del Tobosco. Much of the comic impact of the novel, in fact, comes from Cervantes' depiction of Quixote's almost limitless imitative behaviour and the ways in which the Don's love and admiration of Amadis transforms his perceptual field. For instance, although he doesn't even know Aldonza – only admiring her from afar – Quixote dedicates his deeds of chivalry to her and even retires to the Sierra Morena mountains to do penance for her, just as Amadis had been ordered to do so by another of his loves, Oriana.

Cervantes' thematization of mimesis through the Don brings to light the potential for mimesis to shape not only behaviour but also the *perception* of behaviour; it provides not simply a model for how goals are pursued, but exemplars of which goals are actually *worth* pursuing. When Quixote and Sancho set out on their search for glory, inspired by chivalric romances, the banal objects and events of the Spanish countryside are metamorphosed by the two's obsessive attachment to dreams of the adventures of Amadis. For these two, the ordinary surroundings become full of damsels in distress, of evil and treacherous knights; a barber's basin takes on the form of the legendary helmet of Mambrino, windmills become imposing giants before them, and sheep are transformed into maleficent enemy warriors. As Girard says, mimetic desire works to transfigure its objects, and Cervantes has drawn our attention to this by revealing the presence and importance of the mediator of desire (*DD* 17/25).

For Girard, there are two primary possibilities for how desire is mediated: internally and externally. External mediation occurs when there is a sufficient space between the subject-who-desires and their mediator or model such that they do not become rivals for the same desired object; it is when, as Girard puts it, 'the distance is sufficient to eliminate any contact between the two spheres of *possibilities* of which the mediator and the subject occupy the respective centers' (*DD* 9/18). That is, external mediation serves as a bulwark against the degeneration of imitation into *emulation*.[16] Don Quixote himself provides for us a good example of external mediation: the Don does not have to vanquish Amadis of Gaul, his mediator, for chivalric glory to be his. Quixote's desire to become a perfect knight is modelled on Amadis's own chivalry, but the imitation here cannot involve rivalry because Amadis is a fictional character – a figure in a romance; and, even if Amadis were to have walked the earth, the separation in historical time between Quixote

and Amadis makes physical rivalry impossible. But it is not simply spatial or temporal distance which determines the presence of external mediation – 'distance' here encompasses prestige or social rank. Therefore, it is not solely – or even primarily – a geographical or temporal matter, but what Girard calls a 'symbolic' or 'spiritual' one (*DD* 9/18). Amadis elicits a kind of respect from Quixote that is commensurate with religious reverence (*DD* 2/12). This also means that Quixote, above all, is *aware* of his mimetic behaviour – the Don makes his imitation an object of reflection for himself; his is a mimetic *apprentissage*.

This symbolic or spiritual distance also exists between Quixote and Sancho, who, although occupying the same spatio-temporal location – the landscape of La Mancha – are separated by a wide disparity in social rank. Quixote functions as an external mediator for Sancho in the same sense that Amadis does for Quixote. Indeed, Quixote's own chivalrous ambitions prove to be highly contagious to his companion, who continually takes for his own the desires shown to him by the Don. Before being subject to Quixote's desires, Panza was a simple farmer whose desires were those of a (stereotypical, literary) peasant. But in the presence of Quixote, Sancho appropriates the Don's desires, those that accord with the ideal images of a squire:

> Some of Sancho's desires are not imitated, for example, those aroused by the sight of a piece of cheese or a goatskin of wine. But Sancho has other ambitions besides filling his stomach. Ever since he has been with Don Quixote he has been dreaming of an 'island' of which he would be governor, and he wants the title of duchess for his daughter. These desires do not come spontaneously to a simple man like Sancho. It is Don Quixote who has put them into his head. (*DD* 3/12)

Girard argues not simply for the importance of the *presence* of mimesis in Cervantes' novel, but for the way in which this mimesis occurs – he argues that we should be sensitive to fact that Quixote's mediator is himself fictional; Amadis, in other words, *is a representation*. Through this, Cervantes renders *literature itself a central protagonist of the novel*, a 'character' even, which exerts a powerful influence on the propulsion of the narrative. (It is in light of this that Girard has repeatedly claimed, therefore, that he by no means *inaugurated* the tradition of reflection on mimetic desire, even at the so-called meta-level.)

So, we can see that external mediation exhibits the main features of mimetic desire: (1) the desirability of an object is predicated as desirable by the mediator, rather than on any intrinsic qualities it possesses; and (2) the objects which are designated undergo a transformation in the perception of the desiring individual so that they are imbued with an 'aura', the properties of which are, again, extrinsic to them. The distinguishing feature of external mediation is related to the field of action that the model and the desiring subject inhabit: although the model exerts a heavy influence on the thought and behaviour of the other, the distance between them in terms of either status or space and time is such that no rivalry develops as a result of the mediation.

In addition to externally mediated desire – and in contrast to it – stands the notion of internally mediated desire: this entails a form of mimesis mediated by a model who is not separated from the desiring subject by space, time, or social/spiritual distance, and thus is more liable to become a rival in the latter's attempts to attain an object. At the heart of internal mediation is a double-imperative: the implicit demand of the mediator is the command 'imitate me'; yet, if this were done 'to the letter', then the rival would need to assume the model's place (thereby placing the mediation itself under threat); therefore, the first message is coupled with another message, a warning: 'do not imitate me.' Internal mediation, then, is *conflictual* mimesis, as it entails the convergence of two or more desires on the same object.[17] However, the primary cause of conflict here is not scarcity – which may be thought to precede the inter-dividual relation – but the relation itself:

> Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, *the subject desires the object because the rival desires it*. In desiring an object the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires. (*VS* 145/216–17)

Indeed, the antagonism that is produced would thus not be ameliorated by a surplus of goods; the source of conflict in desire is the presence of the contradictory double-imperative, noted above: 'Man and his desires thus perpetually transmit contradictory signals to one another. Neither model nor disciple really understands why one constantly thwarts the other because neither perceives that his desire has become the reflection of the other's' (*VS* 147/219). Girard

calls the mediator who functions both as a model for desire and an obstacle to its fulfilment the 'model-obstacle' or the 'rival model'. Internal mediation, in this sense, operates along the same lines as what Gregory Bateson called the 'double bind', the presence of an irresolvable contradiction which held (usually) between a message and the behaviour which framed or accompanied it (*VS* 146–7/218–19).[18] In the case of internal mediation, conflictual mimesis, the model incites imitation *and forbids it* simultaneously: 'As I borrow the desire of a model from whom nothing separates me, neither time and space, nor prestige and social hierarchy, we both inevitably desire the same object and, unless this object can be shared and we are willing to share it, we will compete for it' (*RU* 144–5).[19]

One of the most finely articulated portrayals of internal mediation Girard discusses is taken from Dostoevsky's short story *The Eternal Husband*. After the death of his wife, Pavel Pavlovitch Troussotzki embarks upon a perverse journey to seek out, and possibly befriend, her former lovers. In St Petersburg, he finds and ingratiates himself to such a man – Veltchananov. Within a short time, Troussotzki finds himself asking his recently acquired 'friend' to meet his new fiancée and help him select for her an engagement ring; despite some initial, understandable, reluctance, Veltchananov accedes to the request. It is not long before we realize that history will repeat itself; the fiancée, now seemingly unsatisfied with Troussotzki, allows herself to be seduced by Veltchananov. Dostoevsky reveals Troussotzki as a man unable to desire anything outside of the mediation of Veltchananov – neither his partner, nor the engagement ring that he asks Veltchananov to help him select. Girard's interest in the story has to do with its capacity to render pellucid the role of the mediator of desire, of how the mediator makes the desired object desirable at the same time that he or she obstructs the desiring subject from attaining it. *The Eternal Husband* marginalizes the importance of the object and reveals the centrality of mediation. Indeed, Dostoevsky reveals that the former lovers of Troussotzki's wife are more important to him than the wife herself, for it is they who endow her with desirability; Veltchananov's ability to seduce her attests to his power, his superior being, and, for this reason, makes him a privileged mediator of desire (*RU* 47–62/55–68; *DD* 45–51/55–7). It is the rival, Girard argues, that is the ultimate authority in matters of desire; this is the relationship that the novelistic work detects, of a 'self' that 'imitates constantly, on its knees before the mediator' (*DD* 298/297).

Like *The Eternal Husband*, the vast majority of relationships portrayed in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* [*Le Rouge et le noir*] are internally mediated. From the outset of the narrative, the rivalry between two aspiring bourgeois, Monsieur de Rênal and Monsieur Valenod, takes shape in their concerted individual efforts to hire Julien Sorel as a tutor for their children. Stendhal's depiction makes clear that neither particularly wants a tutor to begin with; all that is required for them to fight over Julien's favour is for each to become imbued with the idea that the *other* wants him (*DD* 6/15). Rênal's decision to hire Sorel as tutor is grounded in little more than the suspicion that his rival, Valenod, hopes to do the same. Valenod then attempts to hire Julien because Julien is in the employ of Rênal. Girard describes this as 'double' or 'reciprocal' mediation: the mediator is drawn into the operations of mimesis, imitating the desire of the Other that the Other first located in him or her; it does not require that the desires attributed to the Other are real, or rather real *yet* – double mediation is easily able to *generate* the reality that it believes it perceives: 'Each person prepares himself for the probable aggression of his neighbors and interprets his neighbor's preparations as confirmation of the latter's aggressiveness' (*VS* 81/124–5).

In Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Paul Dumouchel's seminal contribution to political economy – *L'Enfer des choses: René Girard et la logique de l'économie* – Dupuy offers the following lucid summation of this kind of scenario:

> It is neither the subject nor society that determines what is desirable, but the *Other*. Or rather, since the subject and his *alter ego* have become perfectly interchangeable doubles, it is their involuntary cooperation that makes the object spring forth from nothing. Each discovers in the desire of the Other the absolute proof of the reality and value of the object. As these rival desires increasingly exacerbate one another as their human bearers become closer, they become capable of creating a world more real and desirable than any object of physical and social reality.[20]

That is, we attribute to the Other certain (real or imagined) desires which actually precede and/or generate the realities to which they ostensibly refer. In the scenario in *The Red and the Black*, referred to above, although each is acutely aware of his rival's desires, neither actually attributes the origin of his desires to the desires – actual or imagined – of his model-rival; these desires are

seen, rather, as being founded on the intrinsic desirability of the object.

More than this, each of the rivals uses desire as strategy for individuation – the belief that their own desires are the 'true' and 'original' ones, that it is their rival's desires that are derivative, and that the successful attainment of the object would somehow incarnate this truth and reveal to the rival their patent inferiority. The chief irony, however, as Girard sees it, is that, as internal mediation intensifies, the identities of the subjects involved become increasingly singular; escalating rivalry equates to escalating mimesis, and the result of this striving for differentiation actually works to efface differences: rivals effectively become *doubles* of each other. So, contrary to what one might suspect, extreme interpersonal hostility and rivalry, in other words, do not destroy *reciprocity* (*IS* 22/42). Indeed, these may well exacerbate it. To the extent that internal mediation renders protagonists antagonists, subject to the movements of mimetic rivalry, the putative object of desire loses its centrality in the minds of rivals, becoming little more than a convenient pretext for mimetic struggle.[21] Rivals become for each other the *raison d'être* for their struggle, and the object over which this rivalry is ostensibly produced retains its significance solely by virtue of its place in maintaining the misrecognition that their rivalry is anything but the elimination of the other.

In the second half of *The Red and the Black*, we are again faced with some stark examples of internally mediated mimesis. In the latter part of the novel, Julien Sorel moves to Paris and becomes the secretary of the marquis de Mole. He initially finds the marquis's daughter arrogant and unattractive, but soon changes this assessment while at the ball at the Hôtel de Retz, when he notices the attention lavished on her by a group of other young men. Likewise, Mathilde's interest in Julien does not originate autonomously but is prompted by her (externally mediated) infatuation with an ancestor, Boniface de la Mole. The subsequent love affair between the two illustrates how the triangular model that Girard has constructed (or detected) finds further application when the vertices of a 'love triangle' are reconfigured to represent only two participants.

Although their initial attraction to each other is contingent on the presence of actual third parties, once the affair between Julien and Mathilde begins, another kind of triangulation takes effect. This new triangulation has as its vertices the subject or lover at one corner, the (sexualized) body of the beloved as ostensible object of

desire at another, and, finally, the beloved (as mediator). The subject's desire is directed at the body of the beloved, who can accede to this desire if he or she wants to; upon revealing his or her desire for the consummation of the body of the beloved, the beloved copies that desire through a process of self-objectification and self-valuation. Through mediation, therefore, the subject 'realizes' the value of his or her own (sexualized) body such that to allow the lover access to it is tantamount to being beaten by a rival. Girard states that in this form of triangulation the subject will 'desire his own body; in other words he will accord to it such value that to yield possession would appear scandalous to him' (*DD* 159/165).

This dynamic is borne out by the affair between Julien and Mathilde; each time Mathilde gives herself to Julien she is, mysteriously to herself, troubled by her accession, even scandalized by it. Girard argues that the temporary way out of this particular kind of double-bind is for one of the partners to renounce desire or at least give the other the *impression* that desire has been renounced. He calls this act of renunciation the subject's *askesis*, and suggests that its impact resides in the fact that such renunciation of desire is *entirely consonant with it* (*DD* 153/159). In cases of internally mediated desire, it is precisely the presence of the rival that keeps subject and object apart. But it is also the case that the rival's desire is *itself* derived from the subject (both subject and rival mediate each other's desires); thus, the renunciation of desire by either party simultaneously clears the path for the consummation of that desire at the same time that it divests the desired object of its value. Julien's feigned indifference towards Mathilde denies her a mediator to copy, and therefore her self-possession is abated; by seemingly withdrawing his affections, Julien ceases to be Mathilde's (sexual) rival. Indeed, Julien's indifference is precisely that which allows him sexual access to Mathilde's affections. By the same token, Mathilde's desire for Julien escalates enormously after Julien shows indifference towards her; no longer self-absorbed, she begins to desire him intensely simply by virtue of his indifference. It is Julien's feigned self-sufficiency, his seeming lack of need for anyone, especially Mathilde, that makes him so attractive to her; his self-desire becomes the model which provides Mathilde with instructions for where she should direct hers. Julien's state of perceived self-sufficiency – his feigning of God-like independence and indifference – corresponds, Girard suggests, to the condition of the *vaniteux*, so characteristic of Stendhal's novels.

Pseudo-masochism, pseudo-sadism, and 'metaphysical desire'

The hero's *askesis* – the strategic withdrawal or concealment of desire – effects a projection of self-sufficiency or autonomy that attracts the desire of others. Girard calls this attraction to the putative autarky of the other 'metaphysical desire' – a fascination with figures that signify a certain fullness of being, a substantiality that the desiring individual feels that they lack. The figures onto which metaphysical desire is projected mediate 'being' for us; it is via them that we seek to become real and it is through wanting their very being that we come to imitate them. The desired object, therefore, is only the means by which the subject can be reached. Girard argues that desire is ultimately aimed at the mediator's very *existence* in an attempt – or repeated attempts – to absorb it, to assume it (*DD* 53/59; *VS* 146/217). Desire then, in this sense, is that form of mimesis which imbues an appetite with metaphysical or ontological valences (*TH* 296/321–2). Metaphysical desire thus describes a desire not for the objects of desire but for the model's uniqueness, spontaneity – his or her 'qualities': 'Imitative desire is always a desire to be Another' (*DD* 83/89); 'Mimetic desire makes us believe we are always on the verge of becoming self-sufficient through our own transformation into someone else.'[22]

In other words, Girard maintains that the possession of objects is merely a path, the perceived privileged route, to the attainment of the ontological self-sufficiency detected in the rival. In this sense, strategic indifference to another's advances merely taps into that putative self-sufficiency of the model characteristic of metaphysical desire. The desiring subject reasons that, if 'the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, then that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being. It is not [simply] through words, therefore, but by the example of his own desire that the model conveys to the subject the supreme desirability of the object' (*VS* 146/217).

In *Remembrance of Things Past*, the narrator Marcel states that he feels that the being of others is somehow more real than his own; and, in *Swann's Way*, he declares that he feels hollow and lacking, that all around him seem more important and substantial than he (*DD* 54–5/59–61). It is in this kind of scenario in which, Girard says, 'men will become gods for each other' (*DD* 119/125). Marcel's search for an appropriate mediator, one who will be able to fill up

his felt lack, becomes almost his singular obsession; and, as each mediator ultimately proves disappointing, Marcel's personality decomposes, with a succession of selves tied to the succession of mediators that seem to promise salvation (*DD* 90–1/95–6). Again, as desire becomes increasingly 'ontological' or 'metaphysical', the object falls away and desire is directed at the rival *through* the object.

For Girard, metaphysical desire captures the essence of 'masochism', or rather – given Girard's dissatisfaction with the history of conceptual interpolations of this phenomenon – 'pseudo-masochism', which leads ultimately beyond disappointment to something altogether more grim: 'The will to make oneself God is a will to self-destruction which is gradually realized' (*DD* 287/286).[23] As desire suffers disappointment after disappointment, the metaphysical quest itself is not abandoned: rather, the masochist merely seeks out more powerful mediators from which to attain real, substantial being. Put simply, the masochist understands that the object which can be obtained and held easily is next to useless. Therefore, his or her future resides in the search for an object impossible to attain; in essence, the (pseudo-)masochist only pursues lost causes (*DD* 176/181):

> A man sets out to discover a treasure he believes is hidden under a stone; he turns over stone after stone but finds nothing. He grows tired of such a futile undertaking but the treasure is too precious for him to give up. So he begins to look for a *stone which is too heavy to lift* – he places all his hopes in that stone and will waste all his remaining strength on it. (*DD* 176/181)

In the masochistic relation, desirability is a property constituted by the informal taboo interposed between the desiring subject and the object by the presence of a rival. The prohibition, in other words, renders the object desirable at the same time that it attests to the superiority of the model-obstacle; something about the unworthiness of the desiring subject 'obliges the god to forbid access to the holy of holies, to slam shut the gates of paradise. Far from reducing the divinity's prestige, this new attitude of vengeful spite serves to increase it' (*VS* 175/258). The masochist, then, is a casualty of metaphysical desire; he hopes that realizing the desires that he sees in the Other will bring about the hoped-for self-sufficiency and allow him to participate in his divine being.[24] But since the self-sufficiency, divinity, or plenitude that the masochist attributes to the model is illusory, his project to attain the same is doomed from

the outset. The masochist vaguely perceives the fruitlessness of his quest but fails to give it up because to do so would mean that the promise of salvation would have to be given up along with it.

Again, for Girard, Dostoevsky gives some of the most well-articulated novelistic depictions of masochism in literature. The characters in his novels do not enter into rivalry simply because of some ill-defined sense of 'hatred'; they are also attracted to their rivals and even conspire – implicitly and sometimes even explicitly – to help them to achieve victory. There is a double transformation at work in masochism: as the models increasingly become obstacles, desire eventually works to *transform obstacles into models*; that is, eventually masochistic desire is capable of being aroused only by the promise of failure:

> Whenever the disciple borrows from his model what he believes to be the 'true' object, he tries to possess that truth by desiring precisely what this model desires. Whenever he sees himself closest to the supreme goal, he comes into violent conflict with a rival. By a mental shortcut that is both eminently logical and self-defeating, he convinces himself that the violence itself is the most distinctive attribute of this supreme goal! Ever afterward, violence and desire will be linked in his mind, and the presence of violence will invariably awaken desire. . . . Violent opposition, then, is the signifier of ultimate desire, of divine self-sufficiency, of that 'beautiful totality' whose beauty depends on it being inaccessible and impenetrable. (*VS* 148/221)

The ultimate logic is that, rather than the model's desire conferring value on the object, the model's desire itself becomes the most valued thing: the mediator is valuable, in other words, because of the *obstruction he or she is able to provide* (*DD* 176–7/181–2). Masochism lets the desiring subject forget the object and redirects desire towards violence itself: the obstacle *qua* obstacle, that is, becomes the real object of desire (*VS* 148/220–1). In this instance, therefore, rather than obstruction and competition being the results of desire (owing to the presence of a limited number of contested objects of desire), *desire* comes to be determined by *obstruction*. Here one could cite the 'underground man' of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* – a character who desperately covets an invitation to a school reunion *principally because he has not been invited*.

In this sense, the model-obstacle becomes a lightning rod for *ressentiment* because she has revealed the radical incompleteness of the self – but she remains as model because she guides the subject's

own aspirations; without her, desire would have to be renounced. In other words, victory (in appropriation) entails defeat, as with victory comes the de-investment of the objects and the prestige of the rival who conferred on them their value. Thus, the masochist aims not exactly for his own defeat *per se*, but the model-obstacle's victory; in this way, the model – and desire itself – can be preserved. By the same token, a successfully attained object signifies only to the masochist that a more powerful rival should be sought, as this would secure the 'really' desirable, of which the acquired object has proved to be only a paltry simulation (*VS* 148/220–1). Only the victory of the rival would indicate an 'authentic deity, a mediator who is invulnerable to his own undertakings' (*DD* 176/181).

Girard sees the continual search for failure in the masochist as predicated on a certain (perverse) kind of theology; masochistic endeavours appear analogous to the search for a kind of primitive god, a far superior rival who is, for all intents and purposes, insensitive and invulnerable to the masochist's own projects and desires. The masochist seeks out only those models of desire who will deny him access to what he seeks. Desire is 'attracted to violence triumphant and strives desperately to incarnate this "irresistible" force. Desire clings to violence and stalks it like a shadow because violence is the signifier of the cherished being, the signifier of divinity' (*VS* 151/224). Like Groucho Marx, the masochist would never like to be admitted to a club where he would be accepted. In turn, the masochist then turns this judgement onto others; he will reject those who love him most (or profess to) and admire only those disgusted with him.

But Girard doesn't want to make of the masochist some kind of museum exhibit or bizarre psychological anomaly, operating in a fundamentally different way from 'normal' psychological processes. Contrary to the received interpretation, Girard argues that Dostoevsky wasn't so much interested in 'abnormal' psychological processes – merely normal ones *in extremis*. The masochistic relation merely crystallizes a far more widespread but rarely acknowledged psychological dynamic: that desire is prone to feed on those obstacles placed in its way. In fact, in terms of the realization of this dynamic, Girard suggests that the masochist possesses a lucidity that has actually drawn him very near the truth of conflictual (internally mediated) desire, while still participating in its primary delusion: the rival (competition) is everything and the *object of desire is nothing*. In this assessment, Girard seems to be very much at odds with those psychological theories – such as 'rational-

emotive' therapy – that suggest that the pathological psyche simply needs a healthy dose of 'reality', that most psychological dysfunctions are essentially *epistemological* afflictions; this kind of therapy attempts to reveal to the patient her 'distortions' of thought and encourages the patient to 'reorganize' her thinking patterns. Girard would suggest that the pathological psyche has seen reality very clearly, and any distortions are brought out, in fact, by this realization.[25]

In 'pseudo-sadism', Girard sees the 'dialectical reversal' of masochism. The sadist seeks to be a model for imitators for whom she will provide obstacles, and in playing the part of mediator, hopes to turn the adoption of her role – that of a divinity – into reality (*DD* 184–5/188–9). Pseudo-sadism emerges at the point when the masochist, who has worshipped violence, begins to emulate those who have blocked his access to objects of desire: 'Tired of playing the part of the martyr, the desiring subject chooses to become the tormentor' (*DD* 184/189). The sadist looks for imitators whom he can torture in the same way that he thought he was tortured prior to adopting the role. Indeed, it is the sadist's prior experience as victim that suggests the appropriate course of action. Yet, the emergence of sadism, of this 'dialectical reversal', is by no means the simple 'opposite' of masochism: it is, rather, the same condition at a different moment. Nor is the movement from masochism to sadism stable or irreversible; both masochism and sadism are subject to the same double-imperative – of wanting to overcome the rival and simultaneously to be overcome *by* the rival (relating to the fact that the model underwrites the value of the object while keeping the desiring subject from it). In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the underground man is eventually able to attend the school reunion, only to behave like a fool and (again) feel humiliated in front of his peers. This humiliation provokes a mimetic replication of the behaviour of those in front of whom he felt disgraced, a (momentary) sadistic reversal, which ends with his torturing of Liza, a prostitute he picks up (*DD* 185/190).

Although Girard attempts to develop and utilize notions such as 'pseudo-masochism' and 'pseudo-sadism' as accurate descriptions of psychological realities, he is interested in these phenomena not merely as clinical psychological or literary entities, but as realities – both symptoms and causes – that are often rooted in far broader social and historical shifts. We now therefore need briefly to consider this possibility in relation to the phenomenon of 'modernity'.

Metaphysical desire and Stendhalian modernity

Although Girard has attempted to construct – or perhaps has often given the appearance of constructing – theoretical models that accurately depict the operations of human desire *per se*, free from any cultural context, his analyses are often tempered with an acute sensitivity to historical contingencies that give the expressions of such desire very different inflections. At least in part, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* functions as a kind of social history of mimetic desire in Europe from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, as mediated through fiction; various incarnations of the modern novel, as well as political ideals and institutions, are woven together in *DD* in a field of reflection centred on mimesis. Although the work contains a theory of the novel, its concerns are characteristically transdisciplinary. The implications of Girard's theory – as well as the reflections which lead to it – are often able to connect with and help to articulate much broader historical trends and the existence and persistence of certain social imaginaries.

One of the important secondary theses of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* is that internally mediated desire – and the forms of resentment and envy that invariably accompany it – is exacerbated in those cultural environments where traditional social structures have become eroded and their expression less easily able to be legitimately channelled into forms of physical violence. Needless to say, the label 'modernity' is often applied to describe such a cultural environment in relation to the history of the West since the Renaissance.[26]

Additionally, modernity's witness to a general reticence to grant any kind of deference to 'superiority' and its hostility towards traditional forms of authority finds one of its chief ethical expressions in what is often called the 'egalitarian ideal', an ethico-political imperative which rendered 'equality' the privileged yardstick for gauging the application and distribution of justice. To give this characterization a Girardian inflection, modernity offered – and continues to offer – fewer and fewer opportunities for external mediation, and, in this respect, models of desire were (and are) more likely to become, simultaneously, rivals.[27] And yet, despite this valorization of equality during modernity – or, rather, *because* of it – life quickly became a task centred upon 'distinguishing oneself', especially among the middle classes.[28] This project became increasingly common in a world where social hierarchies had become

eroded and each person was progressively subject to a kind of romantic individualism which was predicated on the disavowal of any kind of mediation, external or otherwise. In an insight which finds interesting analogues in works such as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and key elements of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Girard argues that the emergence of increasing democratization, acquisitive individualism, and (upward) social mobility manifested especially in nineteenth-century Europe gave rise to heightened forms of rivalry (*DD* 136–7/141–2).[29]

In the context of his discussion of *The Red and the Black*, Girard notes the exacerbation of internal mediation attendant upon the demise of monarchical authority during the French Revolution. The previous acceptance of the theory of the Divine Right of Kings structured a certain kind of transcendence that underwrote other, derivative, forms of social differentiation; the very tangible socio-historical presence of the king was offset by his status as a quasi-divine figure – the instantiation of an 'immense spiritual distance' between him, his royal subjects, and the rest of the population. When this divine right was abandoned with the overthrow of the monarchy, another, equally secular, theology took its place: 'idolatry of one person is replaced by hatred of a hundred thousand rivals. *Men will become gods for each other*' (*DD* 119/125; 117–22/122–7).

And indeed, one of the foci of Stendhal's work was itself the historical dimension of the egalitarianism of the nineteenth century which allowed rivalrous relationships to proliferate. For instance, Julien's seduction of his master's wife, or of the aristocrat Mathilde de Mole – even being accepted as a potential son-in-law by her father – represent key instances where the social and cultural hierarchization that would have once prevented these episodes had eroded. In the case of Rênal and Valenod, the approximate equality of the two men – for instance, their inhabiting of the same town, their being of a similar social class – allows for the development of internal mediation, which in turn exacerbates their 'equality' (that is, identity). Neither character functions for the other as a transcendent model, but both are subject to what Girard calls 'deviated transcendence' (*DD* 158/163). The destiny of the modern subject – well represented by those archetypal Stendhalian *vaniteux* of *The Red and the Black* – involves it assuming the place of divinity after the progressive demise of transcendence, whether this 'demise' is thought about in terms of the Nietzschean 'death of God' or that of the overthrow of political feudalism. After such shifts, the modern

subject endeavoured to replace those transcendent forms of mediation *with itself* (and those forms of utopianism on which such humanism relies) (*DD* 158–9/164).

For Girard, again taking his lead from Stendhal – as well as from Flaubert and Proust – one symptom of this failed project correlates to the disillusionment that people feel when physical gratification doesn't equate to metaphysical fulfilment (which is the origin of such desire); this Girard labels 'ontological sickness': the kind of disappointment witnessed in *The Red and the Black*, and the felt inadequacy of the narrator in Proust's *Swann's Way*. It is not that Girard (or Stendhal or Flaubert) argues that physical gratification is somehow 'base' or unworthy of attention; it is that the more someone attempts to find ultimate (metaphysical) fulfilment in physical pleasure, the less she is able to attain *any satisfaction from physical pleasure at all* (*DD* 85–7/91–3).

For Girard, the Proustian 'snob', like the *vaniteux*, provides a highly refined – even caricatural – image of the metaphysical desire and ontological sickness rampant in late modernity. The snob, in fact, looks for no concrete pleasures at all; his desires have become *purely* metaphysical; he therefore represents the degradation of interpersonal relationships into a rivalry that is almost totally abstract. For Girard, the emergence of this literary figure (which also finds correlation in the Flaubertian 'bovarist') is contingent on those historical conditions of the nineteenth century which saw the transformation of functioning aristocracies into nominal aristocracies; with their functionality denied to them, 'leisure classes' begin to seek achievement solely through the inheritance of status or prestige. The fight for prestige literalizes the idea of 'fighting over nothing'. But this 'nothing' appears as everything to those internal to the fight (*TH* 305/328–9). It is precisely its world of dematerialized, auratic objects that gives snobbism its caricatural qualities and lends itself so well to literary representation (*DD* 220–1/222–3).[30]

We have seen how – in selected work of the novelists discussed in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* – Girard detects an unveiling and antidote to the romantic construal of the subject characteristic of late modernity: these authors are said to deconstruct the vanity of the romantic subject and the proclaimed but delusional primacy, autonomy, and originality which they accord to individual desires. Girard argues that certain literary works reveal that the romantic subject hasn't escaped the mediated nature of desire, but has merely allowed this mediation to become dissimulated behind the strategies of desire itself. To this, Girard adds an even more contentious

claim: that this literature does not simply offer an antidote to a cultural era which dissimulates its own slavish servitude to the mediator – it is also an antidote to most of those intellectual forms which emerge with and from that dissimulation. In the next section, we will look at how psychoanalysis itself articulates in highly refined form this dissimulation and how the psychology of mimesis allows Girard to account for the phenomena Freud wished to explain without the cumbersome theoretical apparatuses he employed to service this attempt.

The engagement with psychoanalysis

Like Freud, Girard developed his understanding of desire on a detailed reading of literature. To a certain extent, this sets the theses of both thinkers apart from those approaches to human psychology whose claims of scientific status rely on the repudiation or disavowal of the theoretical, even potentially 'clinical', perspicacity of fictional works. But the parallels between these two thinkers should not be overdrawn. Girard has had a protracted and highly complex engagement with psychoanalytic theory, an engagement during which he has not been reticent to acknowledge Freud's prodigious theoretical and clinical abilities, but also one in which he has been sharply critical of certain theoretical presuppositions and conclusions of psychoanalytic thought. To date, Girard's engagement with the work of Freud has centred on three main areas: Freud's theory of the 'Oedipus complex'; the psychoanalytic notion of 'narcissism'; and the more idiosyncratic Freud of (the late works) *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*. We will leave a consideration of the last of these until the second chapter.[31] For now, we turn to examine the first two: the Oedipus complex and the notion of 'narcissism', as these are taken up and developed by Freud and subsequently examined by Girard.[32]

As already discussed, Girard contests the idea that desire is primarily object-oriented – involving what psychoanalysts commonly refer to as 'cathexis' – and favours instead the notion that the mediator provides the origin of a desiring subject's impetus towards an object (*VS* 180/264–5). Given this, it is little surprise that Girard argues that Freud was mistaken in his belief that the libido was the 'sole motor and basis' of psychic processes (*TH* 345/367). Girard's theory of mimesis can therefore not avoid a confrontation with the psychoanalytic characterization of desire as fundamentally object-

oriented and sexual. Let us look then at how Freud depicts desire and sexual cathexis. In his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), Freud offers us the following, now familiar, 'family scene':

> A little boy will exhibit a special interest in his father; he would like to grow like him, and take his place everywhere. We may simply say that he takes his father as his ideal. This behaviour has nothing to do with a passive or feminine attitude towards his father (and towards males in general); it is on the contrary typically masculine.[33]

Freud argues that, through identification with his father, a boy will want to 'take his [father's] place everywhere'; but to do so would inevitably lead to conflict, as this desire would include the intimate mode of relationship that the father has with the boy's mother. (Here Freud explains that the 'little boy notices that with regard to his mother his father stands in the way.') In this particular configuration, Girard has few problems with Freud's scene; allowing for a moment its descriptive veracity – that is, without importing into it any exclusively Freudian interpretation – the relationship between the father and son can be construed like any other form of conflictual mimesis. Indeed, Girard argues that Freud came very close to the notion of mimetic desire in his notion of 'identification' in *Group Psychology*, but eventually turned from it (*VS* 170–1/ 250–1). But the mechanism that Freud eventually adopts to explain the above family scene relates not to imitated desires or the model-obstacle relationship, but to the presence of the sexual/maternal object and the emergence of the Oedipus complex.

Freud describes this mechanism in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), where he contends that the boy develops an 'object cathexis' for his mother, the maternal object, and an identification with his father. This object cathexis (for the mother) undergoes progressive intensification, at which point the father – seen with increasing 'ambivalence' by the child – is perceived as the primary obstacle to the consummation of the boy's desires. For Freud, it is this dynamic which stands at the origin of the Oedipus complex.[34] Girard points out that, in the earlier *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud depicts the boy's identification with the father as developing in a way that is seemingly independent of any sexual cathexis; it involves primarily identification with a parent, with sexual rivalry instead being a *product* of this identification. But, Girard argues, as Freud turns away from this idea in later work, towards his thesis

concerning the primacy of object cathexis – of primary sexual rivalry as the causal element of 'identification' and the generative principle of all other desires – the very notion of 'identification' itself becomes an increasingly vague, problematic element of Freud's explanatory scheme.

Contesting the plausibility of the Oedipal scene – or, rather, the theoretical elaborations that Freud draws from it – Girard argues that this sexual rivalry between father and son, where this occurs, is not the result of some perennial structure, but the product of the same historical situation discussed in the above section: the dissolution of traditional structures of authority during modernity – the increasing range of internal mediation in an era which also included the diminution of a certain kind of parental authority (*VS* 188/275–6). Obviously, what is at issue between Freud and Girard is not the potential for conflict inhering in the family scene, but recourse to very different explanatory mechanisms that attempt adequately to account for this antagonism. For Girard, Freud is ultimately a 'Platonist', yet another thinker who reifies a contingent historical condition into the realm of essences (*TH* 352–6/374–8). As Girard points out, in *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, the predominant rivalry is actually that between uncle and nephew; but we would be unwise, he suggests, to conclude therefore that this gives strong evidence of some perennial 'uncle–nephew rivalry' (any more than Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* evinces a 'father–son theme'). In the case of Sophocles' tragedy, as soon as the 'groundless suspicion' is aroused against Oedipus, Creon becomes his rival; eventually, Oedipus's two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, join in the struggle for the crown. That is, rivalry does not necessarily divide neatly along genealogical lines – and *ad hoc* attempts by psychoanalysts to refract all rivalries through a primordial Oedipal scene are vacuous to the extent that such a refraction appears to fit all conflictual intersubjective phenomena indifferently.

Central to Freud's schema is the notion that desire is the result of the spontaneous influence of an object on a subject: and the putative spontaneity of this attraction to the (maternal) object Freud believes is directly attributable to its intrinsic desirability. With this in mind, Girard spells out exactly what is in contention between his view and the psychoanalytic perspective: 'The mimetic process detaches desire from any predetermined object, whereas the Oedipus complex fixes desire on the maternal object. The mimetic concept eliminates all conscious knowledge of patricide-incest, and

even all desire for it as such; the Freudian proposition, by contrast, is based entirely on a consciousness of this desire' (*VS* 180/264).[35] It is for this reason that Girard has claimed that Dostoevsky's mature works (along with the mature works of others such as Proust and Nietzsche) supply far better frameworks for the analysis of intersubjective phenomena than Freud's to the extent that the former acutely perceive the centrality of mediation in the genesis of desire, not the intrinsic value of any particular cathected object. It is in light of this that Girard contends that Dostoevsky will furnish a more adequate explanation of so-called Freudian phenomena than psychoanalysis can offer with regard to Dostoevsky's 'fiction' (*DB* 36–60).[36]

Contra Freud, it is the father – a certain kind of father in a particular socio-historical situation: a 'Freudian father' no less – who reads into the child 'patricidal' and 'incestuous' urges. Despite his innocence, the child experiences the father's rejection and will begin to perceive the ambivalent nature of his desire. In imitating his father, the child learns and begins to inhabit his culture; but the child learns also that this imitation has particular restrictions, that in certain circumstances the model of desire may simultaneously be an obstacle to its fulfilment. Here we can see the pertinence of Freud's observations concerning the 'ambivalence' involved in identificatory relationships. For Girard, this 'ambivalence' represents nothing more than the oscillatory emotions directed at a model/obstacle – the movement of feelings from admiration to hostility and back again.[37]

For Girard, then, psychoanalysis presents a manifestly incoherent developmental sequence of psycho-sexual development: Freud offers the Oedipus complex – a rivalry devoid of originary identification – followed by the emergence of the 'superego' – identification devoid of originary rivalry (*VS* 185/271). And this characterization itself allows us to see another signal difference between the Freudian and Girardian theorizations of desire. Where psychoanalysis explains conflict as originating *within* the self – the competing demands of the id, ego, and superego – Girard's explanatory scheme inverts this: conflicts within the individual, sado-masochistic 'perversions', and feelings of 'ambivalence' originate in conflicts with others – or, rather, in conflicts located *between* subjects.

As we have seen, mimesis – especially internally mediated mimesis – is invariably not conscious. That is, the imitation of models is dissimulated behind self-representations of unique,

object-oriented desires. Although, with some metaphorical displacement, this dynamic might be said to represent a kind of Girardian 'unconscious', it is not equivalent to the Freudian notion. The mimetic imitation of others is *unwitting* but not (in the Freudian sense) 'unconscious'; it is unconscious only in the sense that it is 'misrecognized' [*méconnu*] or lacks self-reflexivity.[38] Mimesis, in other words, involves the unconscious modification of consciousness. For Girard, the postulation of the Freudian unconscious erroneously individualizes intersubjective relations and thereby locates psychological dysfunction 'inside' the subject. Where the Freudian unconscious defines an individual repository of repressed trauma, the Girardian subject is constitutionally imbricated in a *public field* of misrecognized beliefs and behaviours that inheres between individuals and which, in turn, shapes them.

A further qualification – to talk of the Girardian 'subject' or 'individual' in this way – or perhaps in any way – is misleading.[39] There is, according to Girard, no 'subject' that is temporally (or ontologically) antecedent to intersubjective – or, as Girard says, 'interdividual' – relations. It is not merely the case that we are subject to others' 'influence'; it is, somewhat more radically, that others come to dwell inside us. Indeed, Girard has even gone so far as to depict the 'self' as a convergence point in an indeterminate field of mimetic desire, of 'the interdividual relation' [*le rapport interdividuel*], which is constituted, at base, by its interactions with others. 'Individuality' then, strictly speaking, doesn't exist – it is always already 'interdividuality' (*TH* 84–104/93–113; esp. 84–9/93–8).[40]

Here one might be tempted to see close affinities between Girard's work and that of Jacques Lacan, whose structuralist development of Freudianism envisaged a subject constituted by the (necessarily social) symbolic order; indeed, Lacan's 'subject' is something of an epiphenomenon of it.[41] Now, while not for a moment contesting the importance of the symbolic order, and language particularly, on thought or on the constitution of the subject, Girard locates language itself as an outgrowth of the more fundamental movement of mimesis.[42] That is, mimesis not only incorporates a larger field than 'representation' – in many instances, it *actually precludes it* (especially *self*-representations concerning the fact that we are imitating: there is no need to have propositional knowledge of *how* to imitate or *that* one is imitating in order *to* imitate). So where the (Lacanian) Freudian unconscious is a kind of holding bay for the storage and dispatch of representations, Girardian mimesis is able to operate without representation.

That is, representation takes its cues from mimesis, not the other way around: representation must entail 'consciousness' at some level, but mimesis, needless to say, doesn't always operate with the intentionality of a Don Quixote and his self-reflexive imitation of Amadis.[43] Indeed, mimetic antagonists can operate as such only if their mutual imitation remains obscured from themselves; to them, 'intention' must appear as a 'revelation' originating in themselves – indeed, representation must be effaced in order that mimesis can take hold.

Just as Girard throws into question the 'essence' or 'thing-like' structure of both the Oedipal complex and the 'unconscious', the same kind of critical strategy is applied to the Freudian notion of 'narcissism'. In *On Narcissism*, Freud examines the way in which the so-called narcissistic personality inverts the standard scenario of healthy psychological development. Freudian psychoanalytic theory posits that all children are naturally narcissistic but as they develop this self-love becomes externalized by increasingly attaching itself to a sexual object (of desire). Although supposedly 'normal', according to psychoanalytic theory this process results in the (sometimes pathological) libidinal undervaluation of the ego and overvaluation of the object. In the case of the narcissist (and here, for reasons well debated by feminist scholars, Freud discusses only women), the process is markedly different. Owing to certain developments, 'woman' has been denied the kind of freedom of choice regarding the object that man has been allowed, and so retains her narcissistic outlook by virtue of the fact that her libidinal investments aren't able to find external attachments. As a result, the narcissist develops a self-sufficiency that expresses itself in the desire not to love, but to *be loved*.[44] And here, for Freud, lies the seductive powers of the narcissist. Having been able to retain what the (non-narcissistic) man has not, she – the 'eternal feminine' type (as Freud calls her) – is supremely attractive to him, reminding him of the lost paradise of childhood; she is everything the man is not: indifferent, self-sufficient, inaccessible.

With regard to his theorization of narcissism, Girard sees in Freud a certain theoretical naivety strictly commensurate with his 'Platonism': 'At no point', argues Girard, 'does Freud admit that he might not be dealing with an essence but with a *strategy*, by which he himself has been taken in' (*TH* 370–1/393–4). 'Narcissism', for Girard, is simply the Freudian mythologization of coquetry. Such autonomous 'self-love' – absolute self-sufficiency, metaphysical plenitude – is implausible, standing largely as the ideal state of

being, immortalized by the endless tributes paid to it by romanticism. Girard explains 'narcissism' as another configuration of the mimetic relation; the narcissist realizes that desire attracts desire and that in order to be desired she must demonstrate self-desire. Thus, narcissists' purported self-sufficiency – their aura of indifference – is a projection, a strategy, effected in order that they be coveted (sexually or otherwise) by others. This is the means by which the 'coquette', as Girard renames Freud's narcissist, possesses the 'divine' status that is capable of attracting others to her.

By the same token, the coquette's self-desire is mediated by those attracted to her at the same moment that *their* desire is mediated by the coquette's projected self-sufficiency. This demonstrative self-desire then receives nourishment from the desire it engenders, which is how the mechanism itself is able to regenerate. There is then, strictly speaking, no true 'narcissism', if by that one means true autarky, but only 'pseudo-narcissism' (*TH* 370–1/393–4; cf. *DD* 105–6/109–11). In other words, the attribution of ontological self-sufficiency attributed to the narcissist is an illusion generated by mimetic desire itself. It is because the Other appears to desire himself that I accept him as the object-model of my own desire. This, as Henri Atlan and Jean-Pierre Dupuy indicate, is the self-referential paradox at the heart of all mimetic figures: 'the illusion of self-containment is produced by precisely that which it itself produces, i.e. the fascinated stare of men.'[45]

It is in his construal of narcissism that Freud reveals most clearly what Girard sees as his thoroughly romantic theoretical orientation. Here we see the figure of the radically independent (albeit pathological) subject, possessed of uniquely powerful, individuating desires, in a one-to-one relation with those kinds of romantic heroes, seen, for instance, in many of the characters created by Freud's beloved author Goethe. It is in light of this that Girard asserts that 'psychoanalysis has been able to grant a reprieve – even apparently to grant new life – to the myth of the individual' (*VS* 183/268).

And it is in this context, perhaps, that we can understand the American welcome – and continuing infatuation – with psychoanalysis. The appearance of Freudianism in America, that great historical experiment of democracy and social 'equality' (however well or poorly realized in actuality), correlates with a more general transition from social hierarchy and constraint, to a newer imperative of *self-constraint*. Freudian desire, as the (putative) fundamental fact of life, as the most utterly irreducible element of individuality, functioned to legitimate the realization of this social change and

authorize the generalized (American) ambition of upward mobility, by reading these characteristics as if they were part and parcel of 'human nature'.[46]

This is not to say, of course, that the kinds of maladies observed by Freud are merely nominal or in some way 'unreal'; Girard is deeply appreciative of Freud's observational capacity and his ability to articulate the sufferings of the modern subject. It is rather that he sees the somewhat romantic psychological atomism present in Freud's work as both clinically impoverished as a therapeutic modality and, where 'medically' efficacious, systematically misleading about its own modest successes. Psychoanalysis carries, Girard argues, some of the signal vestiges of what he calls the 'primitive sacred' – the presence of a sacred aura surrounding the analyst which confers on him a kind of transcendent power. And the greater the asymmetry of the patient–therapist relationship, the greater the therapeutic power of analysis. Psychoanalysis represents, therefore, the resurgence of a certain kind of authority during late modernity that confers upon it a kind of religious power; as such, it is also a victim and parable of modernity and its relentless assault on transcendent authority. Psychoanalysis becomes progressively less effective as it becomes de-legitimized, and not, contrary to popular belief, the reverse – its increasingly diminished ability to sacralize the analyst and prevent a thoroughgoing modernization of the patient–analyst relation is what psychoanalysis itself recognizes as the danger of 'counter-transference' (although it certainly doesn't describe it in these terms).

It is in light of this blindness towards its own therapeutic veracity that psychiatrists and psychologists have attempted to transform and extend mimetic psychology's theoretical perspicacity into the clinical setting; but there is no room here for any sustained consideration of what has become known as 'interdividual psychology'.[47]

In those works that have provided the focus of this chapter – his studies of the novels of Dostoevsky, Proust, Cervantes, Stendhal, and Flaubert – Girard examined the dynamics of mimesis primarily at the micro-level; although these dynamics were invariably seen in the broader socio-historical contexts in which they occurred, these early studies remained largely focused on those small-scale interpersonal relations depicted in the novels under scrutiny. In subsequent work, however, beginning with *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard turned to consider the functions and generative capacity of conflictual mimesis in culture and society more broadly. For now,

we must direct our attention to those aspects of Girard's work that deal with issues which link mimesis – especially conflictual mimesis – with social and cultural order. Far from representing a dramatic shift in Girard's more 'psychological' concerns, his reflections at this broader level amplify certain key dynamics already discussed; and, in turn, his theorization of culture and society sheds some new light on issues broached in this chapter.