

# Mimetic Polemicism: René Girard and Harold Bloom contra the “School of Resentment” A Review Essay

**Matthew Schneider**

Department of English, Chapman University  
Orange CA 92666  
schneide@nexus.chapman.edu

**Harold Bloom. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.**

**René Girard. *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.**

Near the end of a 1978 interview that appeared in *Diacritics*, René Girard was asked to comment on several schools of “modern literary criticism,” a subject toward which in general, the interviewer acknowledged, Girard had in the past displayed “a relatively antagonistic attitude.” Though he could scarcely deny the accuracy of such an assessment, Girard began his comments by admitting that he found parts of Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* “admirable” and praising Kenneth Burke’s acknowledgment that a “‘principle of victimage’ . . . is at work in human culture” as “an extraordinary achievement.” One other critic, though Girard neglected to mention him by name, was also extended a qualified approval:

I regard the current “intertextual” school as a generally positive phenomenon. It has liberated American criticism from the fetish of the single work; it has made the antiphilosophical stance fashionable. It has popularized a somewhat romantic but interesting notion of the (mimetic) “anxiety of influence,” etc. In many instances, however, under a liberal sprinkling of “deconstructive” terminology, the old neo-critical or thematic cake is still there and the taste is not as uncanny as one might wish (“*To Double Business Bound*” 221).

The unnamed founder of this “intertextual school” is, of course, Harold Bloom. Girard’s demurrers—that Bloom’s work, though fundamentally mimetic, is romantic and therefore

lends itself to formalist thematizing—seem the obvious responses of any neomimetic thinker who encounters intertextualism as it was first laid out in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (1975). Such objections are harder to maintain, however, with the publication of Bloom's latest book, *The Western Canon*. Though Bloom himself admits to being "an aged institutional Romantic," it is now clearer than ever that his special notion of "influence"—which, as he approvingly quotes Peter de Bolla, "is both a tropological category, a figure which determines the poetic tradition, and a complex of psychic, historical, and imagistic relations" (*Western Canon* 8), shares important similarities with what Girard calls in the Diacritics interview the literary text's ability to "become aware of the mimetic effects upon which it is founded and reveal these effects" ("*To Double Business Bound*" 221). In short, the gap between the anxiety of influence and mimetic desire has shrunk: having evolved over the past twenty years or so, Bloom's theory may now be differentiated from Girard's primarily by the latter's relatively greater willingness to search out and theorize the anthropological bases and implications of conflictive mimesis. Both are, however, guided by an intuition, derived primarily from their readings of literary texts, that (in Bloom's words) "the aesthetic and the agonistic are one" (*Western Canon* 6). The anxiety of influence is the form of mimetic desire to which writers are particularly prone, since they are necessarily led by their craft to the existential bases of their compulsion to create.

2

That Bloom and Girard start from common ground is made clear by *The Western Canon* in two ways. First, like Girard's *A Theater of Envy*, *The Western Canon* is really a book about William Shakespeare, whom Bloom identifies as the discoverer and chronicler of the varieties and mysteries of human nature. Second, and most revealing for our purposes, both recognize that Shakespeare's astonishing cognitive and aesthetic power is, as Girard might say, a representational scandal that has, in turn, stirred a mimetic crisis in the literary academy. This crisis threatens not merely to "dethrone" Shakespeare as the West's (if not the world's) consummate literary genius, but for Bloom presages the death of the aesthetic sensibility, and for Girard, shows just how stubborn is the literary critical world's refusal to acknowledge the relations between imitation, violence, and scapegoating. For both, the measure of academia is taken by its refusal to see how Shakespeare serves as modernity's locus for the necessary anguish that surrounds all types of mimesis—whether imitation is, in Girard's view, the obsessively returned-to content of the plays themselves, or, as Bloom would have it, an existential and aesthetic issue with which all writers (especially today's critics) must, but frequently choose not to, contend.

The mimetic assumptions underlying both Girard's and Bloom's work grant their readings of literary texts a necessary polemical cast—perhaps unfortunately so, since polemicism can be dismissed all too easily as defensiveness or crankiness, especially in critics who been around as long as these two have. Their polemicism is, however, an important, even essential aspect of their work, if only for reminding us that a neomimetic approach will not—indeed

cannot-succumb to the fashionable skepticisms of our times. As true believers in the cognitive power of the literary text, Bloom and Girard present an attractive alternative to the cynicism and defeatism of certain contemporary intellectual trends. The difference between them—and it is an important one—lies in the extent to which each is willing to make an awareness of mimesis' conflictive configurations the starting point for an escape from the dead-end of mimetic circularity. Girard's more systematic theorizing of imitation frees him from an ultimately debilitating fatalism that colors many of Bloom's conclusions about the applicability of literature's cognitive insights to life.

Ironically, in both books the attractiveness and vitality of the literary-critical alternative Bloom and Girard offer is principally manifested by the vigor with which both deplore how literature is treated by today's academy. Both are understandably disheartened by the direction in which literary studies are headed. Bloom begins *The Western Canon* with "an elegy for the canon," a sometimes barely civil survey of current trends in humanities teaching and scholarship. What's wrong with the humanities today? "Our educational institutions are thronged these days by idealistic resenters who denounce competition in literature as in life," writes Bloom. The anxiety of influence, in other words, has spread from the writers creating the canon to the critics and teachers charged with the task of transmitting the pleasures of reading deeply to the coming generations. The old pedagogical goal of appreciating the aesthetic has given way to expressions of resentment, which are all the more contemptible for hiding behind masks of "adventure and new interpretations" (*Western Canon* 18). All this leads to a discouraging misapprehension of canonical texts: now "best explained as a mystification promoted by bourgeois institutions," literature has been reduced "to ideology, or at best to metaphysics." As a result, a "poem cannot be read as a poem, because it is primarily a social document or, rarely yet possibly, an attempt to overcome philosophy" (*Western Canon* 18). This kind of an "attack" on literature is, Bloom acknowledges, hardly new: as it was under the "ancient polemic" of "Platonic moralism and Aristotelian social science," poetry today is either exiled "for being destructive of social well-being" or allowed "sufferance if it will assume the work of social catharsis under the banners of the new multiculturalism" (*Western Canon* 18). In deserting or exiling the aesthetic, however, Bloom argues that today's critics only reveal their own fear of mimesis. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom coined the term *daemonization* to describe one of the means by which a poet evades a potentially paralyzing sense of cognitive and aesthetic indebtedness to strong precursors. The past is simply negated; thus "daemonization or the Counter-Sublime," writes Bloom, "is a war between Pride and Pride, and momentarily the power of newness wins" (*Anxiety of Influence* 101).

3

Enthralled by the siren song of newness, today's "lemminglike" (*Western Canon* 18) academicians hurl themselves from the cliffs in a desperate attempt to evade the guilt that inheres in what Bloom sees as the underlying purpose of Western literature: the expression

of an “achieved individuality” (*Western Canon* 24). The most egregious example of this resentful embrace of the new may be found in Foucault-inspired New Historicist criticism of the works of Shakespeare, whom Bloom identifies as the center of the Western canon for having effectively created modern self-understanding: with “no true precursor in the creation of character,” Shakespeare “has left no one after him untouched by his ways of representing human nature” (*Western Canon* 524). For “strong writers,” Shakespeare’s prodigious achievement offers an inspiration to strive for greatness; for those whose self-confidence is threatened by the spectacle of aesthetic prominence, Shakespeare is the ultimate *skandalon*. In the former category Bloom includes practically every canonical writer who has come since Shakespeare, all of whom have had to contend with the astonishing vitality of his characters and the comprehensiveness of his cognitive vision. The latter category includes today’s New Historicist critics, who express their resentment of Shakespeare’s eminence and aesthetic legacy by proposing that his “greatness” is merely putative and explaining his achievement as a byproduct of the “social energies of the English Renaissance” (*Western Canon* 38). Logically, Bloom points out, this makes no sense:

How can they have it both ways? If it is arbitrary that Shakespeare centers the Canon, then they need to show why the dominant social class selected him rather than, say, Ben Jonson, for that arbitrary role. Or if history and not the ruling circles exalted Shakespeare, what was it in Shakespeare that so captivated the mighty Demiurge, economic and social history? Clearly this line of inquiry begins to border on the fantastic; how much simpler to admit that there is a *qualitative* difference, a difference in kind, between Shakespeare and every other writer, even Chaucer, even Tolstoy, or whoever. Originality is the great scandal that resentment cannot accommodate, and Shakespeare remains the most original writer we will ever know (*Western Canon* 25).

That Shakespeare’s originality differentiates him in kind from all other writers—an opinion which, we will see, Girard, in his own way, shares with Bloom—was apparently evident at the playwright’s first appearance on the London theater scene in the early 1590s. If the Shakespearean School of Resentment had a founder, it was Robert Greene, whose *Groatsworth of witte, bought with a million of Repentance* (1592) branded the young playwright an “upstart Crow,” and warned all who cared to listen that Shakespeare “supposes he is able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and beeing an absolute *Johannes fac totum*, is in his own conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey” (Shakespeare 1835). Today’s resenterers share Greene’s outrage at the impertinence of Shakespeare’s sense of his own aesthetic singularity. Instead, however, of wearing that resentment on their sleeves for daws to peck at as Greene did, according to Bloom, New Historicists and other Shakespeare doubters disguise their defensive scorn under the insistence that the “death of the author” calls into question the received image of the writer striving alone for immortality. If there

are no authors, then the Shakespeare lauded by Ben Jonson as “not of an age but for all time” ceases to exist.

If the real motivation behind today’s critics is the avoidance of guilt, the pangs of which they attempt to keep at bay by exerting theoretical mastery over Shakespeare, then they exhibit a revealing resemblance to Girard’s “mythicizers” of an episode of scapegoating: theory becomes the means by which those who perpetrate Shakespeare’s expulsion from the canon justify themselves and, more important, avoid acknowledging their debt to Shakespeare for the very cognitive tools they use to diminish his achievement. But here, writes Bloom,

they confront insurmountable difficulty in Shakespeare’s most idiosyncratic strength: he is always ahead of you, conceptually and imagistically, whoever and whenever you are. He renders you anachronistic because he *contains* you; you cannot subsume him. You cannot illuminate him with a new doctrine, be it Marxism or Freudianism or Demanian linguistic skepticism. Instead, he will illuminate the doctrine, not by prefiguration but by postfiguration as it were: all of Freud that matters most is there in Shakespeare already, with a persuasive critique of Freud besides. . . . *Coriolanus* is a far more powerful reading of Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* than any Marxist reading of *Coriolanus* could hope to be (*Western Canon* 25).

4

Bloom devotes an entire chapter—and several digressions in discussions of other writers—to proving his contention that Freud’s work is “essentially prosified Shakespeare” (*Western Canon* 371). It seems that this task is partly undertaken in self-defense: Bloom has been accused of producing the “anxiety of influence” by grafting Freud’s concept of the family romance onto T.S. Eliot’s conception of literary influence as benign transmission within the self-evident parameters of a stable tradition. The discussion’s deeper purpose, though, is to provide a monumental paradigm of what Shakespeare-resentment looks like when elevated to the status of a comprehensive theory of human nature. Freud was, in Bloom’s view, Shakespeare’s most vital misreader; though our contemporary New Historicists share Freud’s resentment, they cannot come close to matching his creativity. The chapter entitled “Freud: A Shakespearean Reading” begins by reminding us of two strange but ultimately revealing facts: first, Shakespeare quotations appear throughout Freud’s work with an astonishing, one might even say obsessive frequency; and second, late in his life Freud came to believe J. Edward Looney’s hypothesis that the plays and poems were written by Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford. The concurrence of these symptoms, argues Bloom, constitutes a textbook case of what psychoanalysis terms neurotic repression, and it doesn’t take years of training at the Psychoanalytic Institute to identify what Freud was attempting to repress. The delusion that the “man from Stratford” did not author the plays was

motivated not by snobbery, but by a desire for vengeance:

It was somehow a great comfort to Freud to believe that his precursor Shakespeare was not a rather ordinary personality from Stratford, but an enigmatic and mighty nobleman. . . . On some level, Freud understood that Shakespeare had invented psychoanalysis by inventing the psyche, insofar as Freud could recognize and describe it. This could not have been a pleasant understanding, since it subverted Freud's declaration that "I invented psychoanalysis because it had no literature." Revenge came with the supposed demonstration that Shakespeare was an impostor, which satisfied Freudian resentment though rationally it did not make the plays any less of a precursor. Shakespeare had played great havoc with Freud's originalities; now Shakespeare was unmasked and disgraced (*Western Canon* 60-1).

Freud's need to repress his debt to Shakespeare not only accounts for the alacrity with which the "best mind of our century" (*Western Canon* 373) accepted the appropriately named Looney hypothesis. This grand evasion is also behind the misnaming of the centerpiece of Freud's theory, the Oedipus complex. According to Bloom, the Oedipus complex really should be called the Hamlet complex, since Freud found his paradigm of the "civil war within the psyche" (*Western Canon* 377) where European romanticism had found it, in Shakespeare's most compelling play. Oedipus, writes Bloom, was "hauled in by Freud and grafted onto Hamlet largely to cover up an obligation to Shakespeare" (377). In fact, while the "Oedipus of Sophocles may have a Hamlet complex (which I define as thinking not too much but much too well)," the "Hamlet of the man from Stratford most definitely does not have an Oedipus complex" (*Western Canon* 377).

It is with this assertion that Bloom's thinking comes closest to Girard's. In Bloom's view, Freud overvalued the Oedipus complex, and thus was willing to go to any length to protect the claim to "scientific" originality he felt this concept granted him. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard argues that Freud came close to a "mimetic intuition" in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, but in subsequent works "saw the path of mimetic desire stretching out before him and deliberately turned aside" (171). "Why did Freud banish mimesis from his later thought?" asks Girard. The reason "is not difficult to identify": to embrace the relatively simple mechanism of mimetic desire as an interindividual force is to render the unconscious superfluous, and Freud could not bring himself to give up the mysterious and powerful agency of that region of the mind. In his own way, Bloom asks a similar question: why wouldn't (or couldn't) Freud acknowledge Shakespeare as his cognitive precursor? Bloom's answer is that doing so would have required Freud to relinquish his surest claim to an "achieved individuality": the pride he took in portraying himself as the man who "discovered" the unconscious and its structuring sex and death drives, which are so

conveniently portrayed by the Oedipus myth. "Freud was anxious about Shakespeare," writes Bloom, because he learned anxiety from him, as he had learned ambivalence and narcissism and schism in the self" (*Western Canon* 394). Writes Girard, "Freud was dazzled by what he took to be his crucial discovery. Loyalty to this discovery kept him from forging ahead on the path of mimesis" (*Violence and the Sacred* 183). Though Bloom goes farther than Girard in asking how much bad faith there was in Freud's decision, for both the awareness that Freud sought to evade was the same. To attain the greatest degree of the scientific economy and precision Freud ostensibly sought in his work would have required a sacrifice he was, in the end, unable or unwilling to make: the self-satisfaction he derived from having pioneered a "new" understanding of the human.

5

Today's critics, writes Bloom, have a "curious affinity with the exasperations that keep creating partisans for the idea of Sir Francis Bacon or the earl of Oxford as the true author of *Lear*" (*Western Canon* 60). The mimetic focus of both Bloom's and Girard's theories lead them to distrust profoundly the motives and conclusions of Shakespeare's previous and current critics, though the latter manages to sound considerably less exasperated by these interpretations than the former. The thrust of the polemic in Girard's *A Theater of Envy*, though, is the same as in *The Western Canon*: critics and academics have consistently failed to recognize that the plays and poems will always read us better than any scheme we can devise to read them. Girard's explanation of this state of affairs starts where Bloom's does, with an impression of Shakespeare as qualitatively different from all other writers. But Girard goes farther than Bloom in identifying the real source of Shakespeare's astonishing originality. For Girard, as one might expect, Shakespeare's achievement is the result of his unprecedented cognitive grasp of the mechanisms and ramifications of mimetic desire, which in the plays and poems is usually, though not exclusively, called "envy." In none of his other treatments of literary texts does Girard go so far in granting a writer conscious awareness of this essential principle of fundamental anthropology. Shakespeare, writes Girard, "discovered" the "fundamental source of human conflict" so early "that his approach to it seems juvenile, even caricatural, at first" (*Theater of Envy* 3-4). As Shakespeare's dramatic expertise grows, however, his understanding of the modalities of mimetic desire and its necessary concomitant, scapegoating, deepens, culminating in the work that has (justly, in Girard's view), captivated the world: *Hamlet*.

Girard's chapter on history's most frequently performed and thoroughly studied tragedy—entitled "Hamlet's Dull Revenge" and originally published in another version in *Stanford French Review*—begins by posing the traditional interpretive question about the play: why the long and painful delay in executing the ghost's charge of revenge against Claudius? Girard "solves" the problem of *Hamlet* in a couple of ways: first by reminding his readers that delaying the culminating act was a generic requirement of the revenge tragedy—indeed, many of Shakespeare's contemporaries found themselves hard-pressed "to

postpone for the whole duration of a lengthy Elizabethan play an action that had never been in doubt in the first place and that is always the same anyway" (*Theater of Envy* 273). From our viewpoint, however, Girard's more interesting solution of the Hamlet problem harkens back to drama's putative origin in sacrificial ritual, an origin intuited by Shakespeare and used as the jumping-off point for a consideration of the ethics of revenge in a non-theatrical context. The very existence of the revenge play as a subgenre of tragedy, argues Girard, prompts someone with as sharp and self-critical a mind as Shakespeare to ponder the wide acceptance of revenge as a "sacred duty." What strikes Girard, and what has struck critics presumably since the play was first performed, is the extraordinary degree of reluctance with which Hamlet approaches the task to which, he says, he is prompted by "heaven and hell." For Girard, the play's length and tedium arise not from Hamlet's being "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought," but from Shakespeare's own weariness with the cyclical violence of revenge. As usual with Girard's work, this chapter stands as a kind of conclusion to a carefully wrought narrative exposition of how mimetic desire leads to violence and scapegoating, a story told in this instance through readings of the plays in (roughly) their order of composition. Girard sees Shakespeare discovering and fleshing out his understanding of mimetic desire as the structure of interdividual relations in the comedies; the histories (particularly those set in Roman and Greek antiquity) and tragedies show how mimetic crisis leads to scapegoating and sacrifice; and the romances present forgiveness as the alternative to mimetic circularity. *Hamlet*, written at about the middle of Shakespeare's career (1600) but obviously the play to which he devoted most of his artistic resources, reveals the playwright's own "ambiguous relationship to the theatre," which, writes Girard, is "not unlike Hamlet's relationship to his revenge" (*Theater of Envy* 280).

6

Though this may help to account for the play's intrinsic linguistic and psychological complexity, it does not explain Hamlet's unmatched power of speaking to generation after generation of readers and audiences. Freud explained this aspect of Hamlet by inventing the Oedipus complex; for Girard the play's extraordinary and lasting appeal is not quite so individual a matter. "There must be," writes Girard, "something in the Hamletian transposition of the author's lassitude with revenge and its tragedies that transcends the centuries and still corresponds to the predicament of our own culture" (280). That something is, of course, Shakespeare's insight into the true source of tragic paradox, the double bind of mimetic desire, a process which Hamlet understands not too much but much too well. Girard's explanation of exactly why Hamlet delays killing his uncle is virtually identical to Bloom's: Hamlet is justifiably reluctant about repeating the violent and vengeful deeds of both his father and uncle, and hence ambivalent about fulfilling the ghost's request. "Claudius and Old Hamlet," writes Girard, "are not blood brothers first and enemies second; they are brothers in revenge" (*Theater of Envy* 274). Compare Bloom: "Shakespeare was careful to show that Prince Hamlet was a rather neglected child, at least by his father. Nowhere in the play does anyone, including Hamlet and the Ghost, tell us that



the uxorious father loved the son. A basher in battle, like Fortinbras, the fractious king seems to have had no time for the child between the demands of state, war, and husbandly lust" (*Western Canon* 377-8). For both, Hamlet's delays reflect the desire *not* to imitate the actions of his father and uncle, rather than (as Freud would have it) manifesting a suppressed wish to repeat their sexual and violent exploits.

The most remarkable aspect of this elegant and seemingly self-evident interpretation, however, is not its refutation of Freud's influential reading of Hamlet. Rather, both Girard and Bloom see the willingness of critics stubbornly to divert their gaze from the obvious in favor of what Girard calls a "supreme stage of self-deception where the theoreticians join in and the whole enterprise is justified as a superior form of aesthetic responsibility" (*Theater of Envy* 285) as Hamlet's most important lesson for our time. According to Bloom, academicians who worship Freud (either in his own name or in his Jungian or Lacanian incarnations) pursue such a deception in order to discredit Shakespeare and thereby to stave off the discomfiting realization that he "largely invented us" (*Western Canon* 40). Girard's analysis of the critical blindness toward Hamlet-lengthier and more systematically developed than Bloom's-redounds to an even more damning indictment of today's academicians by demonstrating how their pursuit colludes with the forces of resentment to forestall a potentially freeing exposure of the ethical dead-end of vengeance. In this respect, conventional and currently fashionable interpretations of Hamlet resemble "the traditional reading of many Gospel themes" in suffering from "sacrificial distortions" (*Theater of Envy* 282):

In Hamlet, the very absence of a case against revenge becomes a powerful intimation of what the modern world is really about. Even at those later stages in our culture when physical revenge and blood feuds completely disappeared or were limited to such marginal milieu as the underworld, it would seem that no revenge play, not even a play of reluctant revenge, could strike a really deep chord in the modern psyche. In reality the question is never entirely settled, and the strange void at the center of Hamlet becomes a powerful symbolic expression of the Western and modern malaise, no less powerful than the most brilliant attempts to define the problem, such as Dostoevski's underground revenge. Our "symptoms" always resemble that unnamable paralysis of the will, that ineffable corruption of the spirit, that affect not only Hamlet but the other characters as well. The devious ways of these characters, the bizarre plots they hatch, their passion for watching without being watched, their propensity to voyeurism and spying, and the general disease of human relations make a good deal of sense as a description of an undifferentiated no-man's-land between revenge and no revenge in which we ourselves are still living (*Theater of Envy* 284).

The endless search for increasingly complex and clever explanations of Hamlet's "unconscionable" delay in executing Claudius demonstrates neither the inexhaustibility of the text nor the limitless ingenuity of its interpreters, but the lamentable extent to which our critics continue to be held spellbound by "an ethics of revenge" (288):

7

Should our enormous critical literature on *Hamlet* fall into the hands of people otherwise ignorant of our mores, they could not fail to conclude that our academic tribe must have been a savage breed, indeed. After four centuries of controversies, Hamlet's temporary reluctance to commit murder still looks so outlandish to us that more and more books are being written in an unsuccessful effort to solve that mystery. The only way to account for this curious body of literature is to suppose that back in the twentieth century no more was needed than the request of some ghost, and the average professor of literature would massacre his entire household without batting an eyelash. . . . The psychiatrist sees the very thought of . . . [the] abandonment [of revenge] as an illness he must cure, and the traditional critic sees revenge as a literary rule he must respect. Others still try to read *Hamlet* through one of the popular ideologies of our time, like political rebellion, the absurd, the individual's right to an aggressive personality, and so on. It is no accident if the sanctity of revenge provides a perfect vehicle for all the masks of modern *ressentiment*. . . . It is not *Hamlet* that is irrelevant, but the wall of conventions and ritualism with which we surround the play, in the name now of innovation rather than tradition. As more events, objects, and attitudes around us proclaim the same message ever more loudly, in order not to hear that message, we must condemn more of our experience to insignificance and absurdity. With our most fashionable critics today we have reached the point when history makes no sense, art makes no sense, language and sense itself make no sense (*Theater of Envy* 287-8).

For Girard, this is not a new message; as far back as the 1978 *Diacritics* interview he felt it necessary to castigate "fashionable critics" for refusing to acknowledge the mimeticism that really drives the cycles of theoretic change in the current literary academy. Asked if his work required "an imperative for a theoretical *reprise* comparable to the one that informs Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge*," Girard replied that though at first he felt the need to protect his "hypothesis from being intimidated out of existence by the great theoretical steamrollers of our time," the danger of competing theories had lessened with the increasing clarity with which one can see that "the day is approaching, I am afraid, when the real but limited achievements of these great machines will have to be maintained in the face of a new unthinking rejection by the same forces of mimetic snobbery that espouse

them so unthinkingly at the present time" (*To Double Business Bound* 216). According to Bloom, that day still has not come; indeed, as Foucault's "shadows lengthen in our evening land" (*Western Canon* 16), the critical and academic recognition that mimesis can, and frequently does, manifest itself in conflictive or anxious forms may be farther off than ever.

The principal difference between Bloom and Girard with respect to this grave situation is that the former proclaims he "does not deplore these matters; the aesthetic is, in my view an individual rather than a societal concern. . . . Art is perfectly useless, according to the sublime Oscar Wilde, who was right about everything" (*Western Canon* 16). About the best one can hope for in reading well and deeply, Bloom concludes, is "to enlarge a solitary existence" (*Western Canon* 518). There can be little doubt that Bloom means what he says here; earlier, as we have noted, he confesses to being a romantic, and these sentiments are certainly consistent with such an identity. But if the goal of reading is identical with that of writing—for how much difference can there be between "an achieved individuality" and an enlarged solitude—then what, exactly, is the point of theorizing the anxiety of influence? Bloom's failure to extricate himself from the mimetic processes he intuitively and movingly describes results in a sustained note of pessimism running through *The Western Canon*, producing dire predictions like "our current English and other literature departments" are destined soon to "shrink to the dimensions of our current Classics departments" (*Western Canon* 17), replaced by "departments of 'Cultural Studies' where *Batman* comics, Mormon theme parks, television, movies, and rock will replace Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens" (*Western Canon* 519). Bloom is led to such dismal forecasts, however, not merely by his adoption of what he calls the "true" Marxist criticism, "following Groucho rather than Karl," and taking as his motto "Groucho's grand admonition: 'Whatever it is, I'm against it!'" (*Western Canon* 520). The real source of his pessimism is the fatalism, always latent but now emerging full-blown, that inheres in the anxiety of influence, a mimetic process Bloom views as not only inescapable, but desirable for its power to goad literary ephebes to great artistic achievement. By expelling competition from canon-formation, argues Bloom, the School of Resentment makes genuine literary accomplishment impossible. In short, great art requires a sacrificial competition; in this respect Bloom comes dangerously close to espousing what many of Girard's critics have mistakenly accused him of: endorsing the cultural efficacy, and therefore the necessity, of sacrifice.

8

Great writers like Shakespeare, argues Girard, go beyond merely intuiting the haunting resemblances between the modes of artistic mimesis they employ in their works and the existential forces that called them to become writers in the first place. What separates the writers that survive from those who do not, in Girard's view, is that the former know that "mimetic circularity is not a question of 'feeling,' of ideology, of religious belief; it is the intractable structure of human conflict" (*Theater of Envy* 339). When he discovered the anxiety of influence some twenty years ago, Bloom's faith in the literary text's power to

serve as a means of understanding and negotiating the existential conundrums raised by this mimetic circularity seemed rather closer to Girard's than it appears today. Just a few years before Girard's hopeful (but premature) prediction that the "great theoretical steamrollers of our time" would soon run out of fuel, Bloom presented, in *A Map of Misreading*, a stirring exposition of the relevance of his recently formulated idea to his own profession: I remember, as a young man setting out to be a university teacher, how afflicted

I was by my sense of uselessness, my not exactly vitalizing fear that my chosen profession reduced to an incoherent blend of antiquarianism and culture-mongering. I recall also that I would solace myself by thinking that while a scholar-teacher of literature could do no good, at least he could do no harm, or anyway not to others, whatever he did to himself. But that was at the very start of the decade of the fifties, and after more than twenty years I have come to understand that I under-rated my profession, as much in its capacity for doing harm as in its potential for good works. Even our treasons, our betrayals of our implicit trusts, are treasons of something more than of the intellectuals, and most directly damage our immediate students, our Oedipal sons and daughters. Our profession is not genuinely akin any longer to that of the historians or the philosophers. Without willing the change, our theoretical critics have become negative theologians, our practical critics are close to being Agaddic commentators, and all of our teachers, of whatever generation, teach how to live, what to do, in order to avoid the damnation of death in life. . . . Emerson abandoned his church to become a secular orator, rightly trusting that the lecture, rather than the sermon, was the proper and luminous melody for Americans. We have institutionalized Emerson's procedures, while abandoning (understandably) his aims, for the burden of the prophecy is already carried by our auditors (*Anxiety of Influence* 15-16).

Bloom no doubt meant the phrase "the damnation of death in life" in a classically romantic, Wordsworthian-solipsistic sense. His most recent book's obsessive returns to the question of why today's educational institutions have obsessively devoted themselves to debunking "the mystery of Shakespeare's genius" (*Western Canon* 60), however, demonstrate that one current manifestation of "the damnation of death in life" might be seen in the School of Resentment's blindness to the double bind of its unacknowledged mimetic snobbery. In light of the similarities between Bloom's critique and Girard's, it is, therefore, disappointing that the former ultimately refuses to take up the gauntlet of mimetic polemicism to assert that great writers and their interpreters have, as he apparently once believed, the ability to tell us "what to do." Bloom has been in higher education long enough to know that modes of thinking which achieve currency at the Yales and Stanfords of our land do not stop at the walls of those august institutions. Resentment, like water, finds its lowest point, and so

trickles down through state and community colleges, into high school, and, presumably, even down to elementary school, where, stripped along the way of its theoretical subtleties, it manifests itself in peremptory dismissals of the canonical works to which both Bloom and Girard are cognitively, and whether Bloom likes it or not, ethically indebted. Girard's interpretation of Shakespeare shows what is missing from Bloom's castigation of the School of Resentment's flight from the canonical: the loss of the living presence of texts that have the power still to tell us "how to live."

9

#### Works Cited

Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

———. *A Map of Misreading*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

———. *The Western Canon*. New York: Harcourt, 1994.

Girard, René. *A Theater of Envy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

———. *"To Double Business Bound": Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

———. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Montrose, Louis Adrian. "'Shaping Fantasies': Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture." *Representations* 2 (1983), 61-94.

Shakespeare, William. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1974.