Girard and Bakhtin on the Novel

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The novel is the quintessential modern literary genre, and its emergence in the seventeenth century is a classic problem of literary history. The novel's appearance is connected to the emergence of Modernity, so a theory of the novel is also more or less a theory of Modernity. For Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian literary theorist, the novel is distinguished by polyphony: the author orchestrates distinct voices in ways not found in monologic genres like epic. In this perspective, Dostoevsky is the paradigmatic novelist, the most successful at bringing singular perspectives into productive dialogue. The novel's form, for Bakhtin, is symptomatic of larger social changes in Modernity: as medieval hierarchy breaks down, class and geographic mobility increases, and formerly isolated groups are brought into creative contact with each other.

René Girard, in contrast, does not share Bakhtin's overriding concern with form. Girard's interest lies squarely with content. For Girard, the realist novel demystifies romance and the illusions of desire. Girard derives his theory of mimetic or mediated desire from his reading of leading novelists such as Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoevsky. For both Bakhtin and Girard, the novel genre serves as primary evidence for an ambitious theory about the meaning of Modernity and, for Bakhtin, language itself. Working with the same genre, however, they come to widely divergent conclusions. My goal in this essay is to bring their theories into dialogue, bridge the gap between them, and show how their theories complement each other in fruitful ways. I'll begin by reviewing and evaluating Girard's theory.

Girard published *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* in 1961, and the English translation followed a few years later. The title can be translated literally as *romantic lie and novelistic truth*. (The word play on *romantique* and *romanesque* does not translate into English, unfortunately, and the English translator, Yvonne Freccero, apparently settled for an alliteration: *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure,* published in 1965.) The realist novel is often defined by its contrast with romance, but Girard articulates this opposition in a new

way. The “lie” of romance is that one’s desire for the beloved is singular and spontaneous, that the beloved is unique and perfect, and that union with the beloved will bring complete happiness. The romantic believes, “no one loves _____ like I do.” The “lie” applies not only to romantic desires but human desire in general: for example, modern consumer society, in which people define themselves by, and take great pride in, their taste in music, food, clothing, and other goods.

The realist novel, according to Girard, reveals the truth of desire, that desire is mediated by an other or others. Desire is not original and spontaneous, but rather an imitation of another’s desire. Desire is social, not individual. Girard distinguishes simple appetite, which we share with animals, from desire (*DDN* 3). Babies are born with an appetite for food, but they are not born wanting brand-name consumer products; such desires must be learned, and they are learned by imitation. Girard notes, “the most skillful advertising does not try to convince that a product is superior but that it is desired by Others” (*DDN* 104). The human condition is desire, insofar as we are social animals. Desire is based on something more fundamental: imitation, which is quasi-instinctual—a powerful learning method, but also an expression of competition. When two people desire the same object, they compete for its possession, resulting often in conflict. While desire can be mediated by literary representations, as with Don Quixote and Emma Bovary, often there is a specific human model. Because the desires of the individual and the model converge on the same object (or person), the model then becomes a rival, an obstacle to the goal of desire. Girard argues persuasively that the goal of desire is not actually the ostensible object, but rather the rival, who is transformed by desire into a quasi-divine being, either angelic or demonic.

Miguel Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* is often considered the first novel, and it illustrates Girard’s theory perfectly. Don Quixote has given up his life to the imitation of the “most perfect” knight, Amadis of Gaul, on whom his desires for adventure and romance are modeled. Girard’s genius was to take this obvious point and from it create a theory of the human with far-reaching implications. Madame Bovary, from Gustave Flaubert’s novel, is a modern day Don Quixote who is likewise inspired by her reading of romance. Flaubert’s demystification is more cruel than Cervantes’ in that her adulterous affairs are desperately sordid, and they end in suicide, madness, and the poorhouse, for her orphaned daughter.

Girard notes that the mediator of desire can be “external” or “internal” to the social world of the desiring individual. When I imitate the desire of someone I know, this can lead to rivalry for the same object of desire, as in the classic love triangle; such is internal mediation. In contrast, Don Quixote’s mediator is external. Since he doesn’t have any contact with Amadis of Gaul, there is no possibility of entering into conflict with him. External mediators are preferable to internal mediators for this

reason, and they can serve as positive role models. Many critics, of course, see Don Quixote's illusions as ennobling. But the fact remains that he has enslaved himself to a false ideal. Girard is aware that Don Quixote is a comic figure, and that his novel is not just a simple morality tale warning us against reading too literally. Nevertheless, Don Quixote is deluded, and from a religious perspective his life is wasted. Girard disagrees with the Romantic and modern critics who take Don Quixote as heroic in his illusions. Girard points out the essential vanity in Don Quixote's attempts to "rescue" the helpless: "The victim to be rescued is never more than a pretext for asserting oneself gloriously against the whole universe" (*DDN* 144). Accordingly, Girard places great weight on Don Quixote's final deathbed return to sanity when he repudiates his chivalric illusions.

Girard finds a historical development in the novel genre from depictions of external mediation in early novels such as *Don Quixote*, to the representation of internal mediation, which is more messy and complicated. Dostoevsky's mature novels exemplify the latter. In his novels, we find individuals who are obsessed with their mediators in perverse ways, such as the husband, Trusotsky, of *The Eternal Husband*. One of the peculiarities of mimetic desire is that the beloved is not considered worthy of romantic love unless a mediator confirms the desire. So Trusotsky introduces his fiancée to his rival, creating a love triangle which frustrates the achievement of his desire. With internal mediation, the subject and model become mediators for each other, leading to an escalation of rivalry and conflict, often resulting in the anarchic situations not unusual in Dostoevsky's novels. In the novelistic representation of internal mediation, individuals often take actions which frustrate the achievement of their desires. Any object of desire that can be actually attained becomes ipso facto worthless. The true object of the desire is the "being" of the rival, but because this goal is inherently unattainable, individuals seek for ever more inaccessible objects. While Don Quixote, at least, achieves a semblance of transcendence in his quests (with his local fame), the modern protagonist is condemned to the endless pursuit of frustrated transcendence. The only true transcendence, for Girard, is to be found in Christianity, through the renunciation of mimetic rivalry and the embrace of Christian love. God is the only valid mediator for desire.

What makes the novelistic revelation of mimetic desire so revolutionary is that its operation is essentially unconscious. The individual remains convinced that his desire is spontaneous and original, and that only the evil obstacles to his desire prevent him from achieving the utopia of fulfilled desire. The individual is oblivious to the fact that he often goes out of his way to create impediments. One might object that Don Quixote is aware that his desire is modeled on Amadis of Gaul, but he remains unaware that the world of romance is entirely fictional, and so he remains essentially deluded. He is convinced that only the evil "enchanters" who

constantly deceive him prevent the full achievement of his dreams.

The most important context for the great novels, for Girard, is the life of the novelist. The novelist is a former romantic who has suffered acutely from the illusions of desire. Since romantic desires are so blinding, he must undergo a quasi-religious conversion that illuminates his darkness. The novelist is one who has experienced the delusions, the degradations, the disappointments of mimetic desire most acutely in his own life. Only one who drinks this wine to its last bitter dregs can finally see through to its ultimate emptiness and vanity. In this way, the novelist is able to decisively renounce his previous life and find reconciliation with himself and others—an experience which constitutes the raw material for his novels. The great novels lead the reader through this experience, plunging us into the world of romantic betrayals, struggles, and chaos. At the end of such novels, the protagonist finally renounces his former life and achieves peace. Raskolnikov's redemption at the end of *Crime and Punishment* through the ministrations of the Christ-like Sonia is exemplary in this regard. Romantic lies are so overwhelming that only such a radical conversion is able to overcome them. So while the truth of desire can be expressed in rational propositions, only by a terrifying journey through fiery "hell" can individuals finally arrive at the base of Purgatory hill and begin the labor of repentance. The Künstlerroman conforms to this pattern, telling how the artist became the person capable of writing the novel we are reading.

A theory of genre must not only distinguish the genre from other genres but also explain the genre's emergence. For Girard, the novel is rooted in the ground prepared by the Christian revelation, and explaining his take on Christianity requires a brief excursion into his anthropology of sacrifice and human origins, which he developed from his theory of mimetic desire. First of all, Girard makes a sharp distinction between myth and the Bible. Myths generally represent in disguised form an originary human murder or scapegoating, which Girard argues founds and structures the pre-historic human community as a sacrificial order. The Bible, in contrast, reveals the truth of the founding murder, especially the New Testament Passion of Christ, which presents Jesus as an innocent scapegoat. The violence of his death is human not divine. The opposition of Bible and myth is analogous at a broader level to the opposition of novel to romance. Girard argues that mimetic desire leads to scapegoating: when several people compete for the same object, a mimetic crisis ensues which endangers the existence of the group. The crisis is resolved, according to Girard, when the group finds a scapegoat who is held responsible. The scapegoat is demonized and then killed, channeling and purging the violence of the crisis. But afterwards, the scapegoat is associated with the peace which results from his death, and then divinized, becoming a sacrificial deity who requires periodic, symbolic repetitions of the founding murder. The story of Christ's Passion demystifies this basic human pattern, revealing the innocence of

the victim.

How does Christianity prepare the ground for the novel? The influence of Christianity can be discerned at two levels, the larger social-political evolution of the West, and in the conversion of individuals. Girard's emphasis on conversion in his theory derives from New Testament Christianity, which calls for repentance and faith resulting in a new identity, e.g., from Saul to Paul. Girard maintains that Christian conversion is not comparable to or derived from any of the numerous pagan cults or philosophies in the ancient world (*MT* 265-8). As we have seen, the denouement of the great novels often represents the conversion of the protagonist, and the insights of the novel result from the conversion experience of the novelist. Such a conversion is not always overtly Christian, but it does involve an insight into the vanity of romantic illusions and the mimetic nature of desire. But how does the Passion story relate to mimetic desire? We can observe mimetic behavior in the events surrounding Christ's Passion, for example, the crowd's demand for the release of Barabbas and the death of Jesus; and Peter's repudiation of Jesus after his death when he is surrounded by hostile non-believers. Girard interprets Christ's command to "turn the other cheek" as a refusal of mimetic conflict.

In terms of the social-political evolution of the West, the New Testament demystifies the sacrificial nature of traditional hierarchies, creating a skepticism about the divine nature of political authority with far-reaching consequences. Christianity frees individuals from the illusion that "sacred" violence is necessary, leaving them with the stark choice between God or Satan. Girard interprets Satan as the biblical metaphor for mimetic influence leading to violence. The Christian revelation is so radical, according to Girard, that it took many centuries for humans to fully understand and put into practice its revelations.(1) Theologians commonly misunderstood Christ's death on the cross as a sacrifice analogous to pagan sacrifice.

Cesáreo Bandera has examined Medieval and Early Modern literature in terms of the Girardian theory of the Christian revelation. For Bandera, the key issue is the representation of heroes who serve as models of identity. The epic hero, who triumphs by military might, is essentially anti-Christian according to Bandera. Medieval artists sometimes tried to assimilate Christ to pagan concepts of a hero, picturing him as the Pantocrator, Ruler of the cosmos. The task for writers, which took many centuries, was to go beyond the epic concept of heroic identity (based on sacrificial violence) and find new models. Cervantes' *Don Quixote* was a crucial step in the demystification of heroic models. Don Quixote transcends the binarism of the sacred because he is neither idealized nor demonized (cf. Thersites in Homer's *The Iliad*).(2)

In religion, the later medieval focus on the sufferings of Christ was decisive in ushering in a new model of identity, one which recognized the sinful, fallen nature of the self. Other significant developments include the *Devotio Moderna* movement, the *Imitatio Christi*, Christian mysticism, and Jesuit spiritual exercises; all of which paved the way for Erasmus and the Reformation. As Catholics, however, both Girard and Bandera have a largely negative view of the Protestant Reformation. Bandera sees Protestant iconoclasm as regressive form of sacrifice, what Girard calls "Satan driving out Satan" (Bandera, *TSG* 236fn). In Girard's interpretation of this New Testament episode, Satan *is* essentially the action of driving out, of sacrificial expulsion; so that "Satan driving out Satan" is a false reformation that merely reproduces the logic of sacrifice.(3) Girard sees Protestantism as symptomatic of the Early Modern dissolution of sacrificial order, and the inability of existing traditions to find any workable replacements:

Today, almost a thousand years later [after the schism between Eastern and Western Christendom in 1054], we are witnessing the breakdown of the Reformation. There are now thousands of Protestant churches. Protestantism is coming apart at the seams, crumbling really. Yet some of the new churches display more spiritual fervor than the old ones. (*TOWSC* 77)The breakdown of the sacrificial order in the Early Modern period has ambivalent consequences in Girard's reading. On the one hand, humans are (at least partially) freed from the lies that justify killing the innocent. We no longer countenance the execution of accused witches, for example. The destruction of such idolatrous illusions allows for the development of modern science and medicine. But on the other hand, we lose the traditional protection (i.e., scapegoating) against mimetic violence. Secularization means that "men become gods for each other." The novel takes as its subject matter this new world of internal mediation, which escalates as we become more secular. Modernity allows for the insights of the great novelists into the hell of internal mediation. The stories and novels of Franz Kafka exemplify the nightmarish world of internal mediation and frustrated transcendence which typifies Modernity at its worst.(4) Despite the dangers created by demystifying sacrificial illusions, their destruction is still necessary for the possible turn to non-sacrificial truth and peace.

Girard's basic insight—that the novel explores the workings of desire in the modern world, revealing its mediated nature—is solid, well-supported, and, indeed, revolutionary—because of its profound anthropological implications. Nevertheless, we need to consider its limitations. The most obvious objection to Girard's theory is that it is too narrow to encompass such a diverse genre as the novel. Girard speaks mainly about what he calls the "great novels" of his chosen major novelists. So to that degree, he himself limits the scope of his theory. At the same time, however, he often makes generalizations about "the world of the novel," and the clear implication is that his theory accounts for the main *raison d'être* of the genre, even

if some novels fit better than others. Moreover, the opposition of *mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* implies a way to classify novels according to their perspective on desire—a classification which corresponds broadly to a distinction between popular (i.e., romantic) and more serious novels. In this way his theory can be (and has been) expanded to account for more that just his chosen great novels. Furthermore, insofar as desire is fundamental to what it means to be human, all realist novels afford a perspective on the workings of desire in the modern world.

The main limitation of Girard's theory, in my view, is the binary nature of his distinction between the sacrificial and the non-sacrificial, an opposition he insists is not dialectical; he argues they are true contraries which cannot be synthesized. But in this way he creates a Manichean world-view that ironically reproduces the very binarism of the sacred that he, better than anyone, has demystified. For example, Girard consistently denounces Romantic individualism as a form of the *mensonge romantique,* the illusion that one is special and unique. To some extent Girard has a valid point; if one's identity is defined by one's desires, and desire is mediated, then the self is by definition social and mediated, not autonomous. Girard opposes this false individualism to the true individualism offered by Christianity: "passion" as opposed to "desire" (*RFU* 43).(5) But individuals, in novels as in life, do not fit into such black and white categories. Girard imposes a theological framework which is foreign to the representation of life in novels, even his chosen novels.

Girard insists that there is no alternative to *mensonge romantique* besides the Christian refusal of violence and mimetic slavery. I agree this is a valid distinction—a true opposition—but a false dichotomy. Girard ignores how practical *belief* in individualism actually functions in Modernity. What actually distinguishes one person from another? We should remember that difference is ultimately a question of perception and belief. There are real differences in values, abilities, and achievements, of course; but what matters for social order is the perception of difference; because it is perception/belief that governs behavior. A superiority which must be constantly proved, for example, does not function effectively: a man who always needs to draw his gun to prove his authority is less effective that one whose authority is respected by the community.

We know from Girard that the basic enemy of social order is the sameness that results from imitation, because it stimulates rivalry and conflict. It follows that difference is what enables social order and peace. The most obvious and important form of difference, historically, is the division of individuals into different groups; for example, rulers, priests, and workers. The worker is inhibited from imitating the ruler or priest, competing and thus conflicting with them. The different classes of society are not equal but rather arranged into a hierarchy. Girard's work on scapegoating suggests that hierarchy can be seen as an institutional form of

sacrifice: the interests of the lower classes are sacrificed to the interests of the ruling classes. Insofar as class divisions are arbitrary and unmotivated, this is true. But this ignores the fact that everyone benefits from social order, as Hobbes pointed out in his social contract theory. Furthermore, class divisions are not completely arbitrary; aristocrats were originally warriors distinguished by their skill in battle. When class status is hereditary, of course, then its original justification is weakened over time. Kings and aristocrats have always appealed to the sacred to justify their position. Girard argues that the sacred is really a disguised form of sacrificial violence. Christianity, in contrast, asserts the equality of souls before God. Christianity's historical appeal was due, in part, to the weakness of traditional justifications of class status. In the Renaissance, traditional hierarchy was undergoing a process of disintegration, a process which results in Modernity. This is the essential context for the emergence of the novel. What is at stake in larger terms is not the false alternatives of Christianity or apocalypse, but simply different means to social order.

As Girard points out correctly, the disintegration of cosmic hierarchy poses problems for social order; problems which the novel takes for its subject matter, usually at the local rather than national level. What Girard didn't recognize, or at least didn't fully appreciate, is that *individual* difference can also serve to preserve order. If I believe that I am special and unique, then I am relieved of the burden of trying to compete with others. In a similar fashion, if I have an external mediator, a personal hero who far exceeds me and everyone in my social group, then I needn't feel resentment when someone in my group receives recognition that I feel is excessive, since my hero far exceeds both of us in both achievement and recognition. What each person needs is a scene on which they can successfully compete and earn recognition. The West offers many such avenues, the Internet being an obvious example. If I'm perceived as different, then I don't need to be the best. I'm the best at being *me*. This is the ideology of individualism, derived largely from Protestantism, and it allows for the continued existence of the modern world, indeed, drives it.(6) Individualism is not a panacea, of course, and there is plenty of free-floating resentment resulting in occasional outbreaks of violence. The crux is that recognition or centrality has to circulate in Modernity. Everyone needs to feel they have a voice. Someone who monopolizes the limelight arouses our resentment (although they may also fulfill our fantasy of centrality). Marxists see the ideology of individualism as a conspiracy to mystify the "truth" of class society. Yet everything is relative. Compared to the Medieval and Renaissance periods, our society really does offer widespread opportunities to talent and discipline irrespective of class status, race, or gender. And there is really is substantial fluidity of class status (or more accurately, simply wealth) in the modern world. The myth of Marxism is that utopia is possible, a myth hundreds of times more destructive than the petty but constructive illusions of individualism. It's true of course that individualism tends to

undermine many of the traditional bases of community. But community can be oppressive just as often as nourishing. Our highest value is ultimately freedom, and we retain the freedom to form (or leave) a great variety of associations at our choice.

The “divine” hierarchy that structured ancient and medieval societies worked by repressing mimetic desire through taboos and prohibitions. This structure worked for most of human history, enabling the species to continue. The modern world, in contrast, allows for the liberation of desire, with laws mainly directed to the protection of rights and enforcement of contracts. Each of us can aspire to the stars, and we are encouraged to do so. At the very least, each of us can work for and create a better life for ourselves. Whereas unrestrained mimetic desire was a destructive force in the ancient world, the modern world harnesses desire and the resulting competition as positive forces for progress. In economic terms, if the free market runs on desire, then it becomes necessary to *understand* desire, not just its destructive illusions, but also its potential for enriching our lives. The novel explores the complex (and often counterintuitive) ways that desire works in the modern world: essential information for thriving or simply surviving. The “marriage market” in Jane Austen’s novels and others is one example. The “marriage plot” of so many Victorian novels teaches young men and women to restrain their immediate desires in order to achieve their enduring desires. Girard’s view of desire in binary terms is ultimately too narrow. He has acknowledged that desire can be good, but his theory still depends on a sharp distinction between sacrificial and non-sacrificial. He hypothesizes that culture originates in the violent scapegoating of a human individual. This originary legacy creates a Manichean and even conspiratorial world view in Girard’s theory. But Eric Gans, with his Originary Hypothesis, has demonstrated convincingly that culture can be explained more economically as the *deferral* of violence.(7) Culture is built on the mutual *exchange* of sacrifice, at all levels. Exchange, and the deferral of desire, are the originary and still essential operations of culture. The maturity of the individual, in or out of the novel, involves the recognition that not all sacrifices are reciprocated, and they don’t need to be. In Christian terms, it is enough that God recognizes my sacrifice.

One area of agreement between Girard and Bakhtin is an understanding of human culture as fundamentally social. Girard makes this point within the context of psychology, however, while Bakhtin focuses on language. The insight that language is social is the foundation for Bakhtin’s linguistic and literary theories. He begins his seminal essay “Discourse in the Novel” by observing:

verbal discourse is a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning. It is this idea that has motivated our emphasis on “the stylistics

of genre.” (259)Bakhtin has a strong sense of language as structure, a recognition of what’s called “the content of form.” By his definition, language has a certain autonomy or agency, resulting from its social nature:

Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intention; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (“Discourse” 294)Unlike pure structuralism, Bakhtin clearly allows for individual agency. What is most original about his quasi-structural approach is his emphasis on the plasticity and diversity of discourses and how they interact. Bakhtin allows more room for creativity and freedom in the structuralist “prison-house of language” than most neo-Marxists.

The best way to introduce Bakhtin’s theory of the novel is by reviewing his understanding of language. His key linguistic concept is *heteroglossia*, a term that requires some unpacking. We know that any group of people, to the degree of its isolation from others, will develop its own way of speaking—a distinctive vocabulary, jargon, characteristic speech and writing patterns— professions, for example, locales, hobbyists, enthusiasts of all kinds, economic classes, time periods, even families. In communication theory, such groups are called discourse communities, and individuals belong to a variety of such communities and speak in a variety of ways, according to which group they are addressing. Even “an illiterate peasant,” Bakhtin writes,

miles away from any urban center, naively immersed in an unmoving and for him unshakable everyday world, nevertheless lived in several language systems: he prayed to God in one language (Church Slavonic), sang songs in another, spoke to his family in a third, and when he began to dictate petitions to the local authorities through a scribe, he tried speaking yet a fourth language. (“Discourse” 295-6)The language of a particular discourse embodies a distinct set of values, a way of viewing the world. Language is not, then, a transparent representation of the world, nor is it a straightforward expression of an individual’s intentions; different forms of language express different ideological perspectives on the world (“Discourse” 271). Insisting on the diversity of discourses within any language, Bakhtin opposes any linguistic approach which views a language as a monolithic whole (“Discourse” 265, 270, 288). Heteroglossia refers first of all to the stratification of language into discourses, so that no utterance is neutral and transparent (“Discourse” 272). Furthermore, different discourses are constantly interacting with each other, spreading their influence, so that any particular utterance may exhibit a dialogue between discourses. Such interactions typically involve some struggle, to the extent that the values of each discourse conflict with each other.

The individual’s relationship to the various discourses of his environment is fraught with struggle. Authoritative discourses— religious, political, moral—come to us as an alien force, full of the intentions and accents of others:

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. (“Discourse” 293)In fact, the individual is defined by just this process of appropriation and adaptation: “The ideological becoming of a human being, in this view, is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others” (“Discourse” 341). Individuals must exercise agency in their relationship with the language of those in authority. Such authoritative discourses are not without value; they may embody necessary norms of behavior. But the word of authority, initially, comes from outside, from the past, from tradition, demanding our acknowledgement and limiting our freedom. The individual must struggle with such voices, discarding some and acknowledging others, so that they become “internally-persuasive” discourse, an element of identity and a means of agency. Novels sometimes portray this struggle: for example, Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, in which Huck feels torn between the authoritative discourse on slavery and his own human feelings for the escaped slave Jim.

For Bakhtin, language is “always-already” dialogic, always orientated to a potential audience, always responsive (whether in sympathy or hostility) to the concerns of others, even in our most private thoughts. The stratification of discourses, and their constant interaction with each other at every level, including any particular utterance, constitutes what Bakhtin calls heteroglossia, which he considers the defining nature of language.

An utterance can take different postures towards its own heteroglossia, seeking to exclude or embrace it. Some literary genres such as epic seek to create a monologic, unified perspective that embodies the traditions of a culture. The novel, on the other hand, embraces heteroglossia, providing a variety of different ideological perspectives on the world. In the novel, any particular discourse is relativized, revealed as limited, as existing only in dialogic relationship with other discourses and perspectives. Some of the dialogic styles of the novel are specifically literary in form, such as *skaz*, when the narrator mimics the oral speech patterns of one of the characters. But the particular virtue of the novel is that the genre draws on virtually all of the available written and oral discourses of a language, with or without quotation marks.

For Bakhtin, the novel's embodiment of a great variety of discourses, and its particular attitude towards different discourses, are what define the genre. Such a stylistic definition is rather unusual; the novel is usually defined by its content and only secondarily by its style, because the basic form is narrative, which the novel shares with romance and epic. In an important sense, for Bakhtin, the novel is "about" language, specifically heteroglossia. He connects the emergence of the novel to the "epistemological turn" in philosophy with Descartes, and the novel is likewise fundamentally epistemological in its orientation ("Epic" 15). The novel's great discovery is that every discourse is a form of knowledge, and that an utterance is meaningful only in the context of discourse. According to Bakhtin, the novel, ideally, does not employ any master discourse or narrative voice which governs and judges the other discourses from a superior perspective. Indeed, the best novels question the legitimacy of any such master discourse. The novel is self-aware and self-critical in a way foreign to other genres ("Epic" 6). Bakhtin acknowledges, however, that some novels exemplify his theory better than others. He even characterizes some novels as "monologic" in comparison to other more "dialogic" examples. But such novels are monologic only as compared to other novels, and the genre as whole is still distinguished from other genres by its dialogic nature. Bakhtin classifies novels according to the degree which they reveal heteroglossia. He doesn't explicitly rate novels in this way, but his favorites are clearly the more heteroglossic.

The novel and its revelation of heteroglossia have clear socio-political implications. The novel is a subversive genre in Bakhtin's reading because it relativizes and questions all forms of authoritative discourse, creating a carnivalesque context where traditional power relations are upended. Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* is Bakhtin's great exemplar of literary carnival, but he also finds carnivalesque elements in Dostoevsky and others. In general, Bakhtin loved comic literature—Rabelais, Charles Dickens, and Lawrence Sterne, for example—and his theory of the novel works particularly well with comic novels, which often parody the voices of authority ("Epic" 21-28). Parody, of course, is a great example of dialogic discourse. The value of the novel is tied up with its subversive tendencies. (We should note that although he typically framed his discussion of subversion in Marxist terms, the political authorities in Stalinist Russia found his work threatening, and his books were suppressed until relatively recently.)

To a large extent, Bakhtin sees the novel as a relatively independent literary development; he doesn't adhere to any crude Marxist "reflection theory," whereby literature is a passive reflection of economic developments. Nevertheless, he does recognize that the novel is a child of the modern world, expressing some of its unique advances. Certain developments in Early Modern Europe parallel the dynamic structure of the novel. Bakhtin writes,

Polyglossia had always existed (it is more ancient than pure, canonic monoglossia), but it had not been a factor in literary creation; an artistically conscious choice between languages did not serve as the creative center of the literary and language process. . . . The new cultural and creative consciousness [of the novel] lives in an actively polyglot world [i.e., Modernity]. The world becomes polyglot, once and for all and irreversibly. (“Epic” 12)The progress from a feudal economy to capitalism is crucial, of course; the increase of trade brings about enormous changes, bringing formerly isolated areas into contact with a wider world; and trade also brings about new possibilities of social mobility. In a very literal sense, different languages and discourses are brought into dialogue with each other, such that history parallels novelistic structure. As Bakhtin observes, the particular form of the novel is

powerfully affected by a very specific rupture in the history of European civilization: its emergence from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semipatriarchal society, and its entrance into international and interlingual contacts and relationships. A multitude of different languages, cultures and times become available to Europe, and this became a decisive factor in its life and thought. (“Epic” 11)Bakhtin has enjoyed phenomenal influence in the wake of post-structuralism, especially by neo-Marxist critics interested in forms of subversion. His work on language and his various neologisms have become essential features of the current theoretical landscape, and for good reasons. But we need to dig deeper into his key concept of heteroglossia in order to understand what is really at stake in the relationship of different discourses. It’s been observed that Bakhtin’s theory is utopian, but what exactly is missing? He maintains that real contradictions drive the process of dialogism and that such dialogue is open-ended and unfinalizable; he resists the move to any easy synthesis. But the possibility of real conflict is missing; instead we find only a vaguely-motivated dialogue. The basic problem with Bakhtin is that he lacks any real sense of the anthropological function of language in deferring violence. As we’ll see in our discussion of Dostoevsky, what brings discourses and voices into dialogue is mimesis, the same force that creates their contradictions, which are not merely logical, but real conflicts of interest. The deficits in Bakhtin’s theory must be remedied by Girard’s theory of mimetic desire, or else we are left with a romantic aestheticizing of language and literature.

By the same token, we can also see that Girard lacks any theory of language, so his theory of the novel would benefit from Bakhtin’s sensitivity to different discourses. Yet Girard does not take kindly to any variety of structuralism. He writes,

In Bakhtin the notion of the carnivalesque designates the form of what no longer has form and thereby remains the prisoner of formalism, like rites themselves. The notion of the dialogic inflicts all sorts of miseries on the linguistic structures, strives radically to weaken them, multiplies their substitutions and oscillations, but

nonetheless in the final analysis remains the prisoner of linguistic structuralism. To escape the latter, it would be necessary to understand that the total of this operation always equals zero. This would instantly free us from all methodological *préciosité* and grant us access at last to the doubles [created by mimetic desire], that is, the essential. (*TDBB* 46)Girard assimilates linguistic form to sacrificial "rites," and he reads Bakhtin's notion of the "carnivalesque" as simply a lack of form resulting from the weakening of sacrificial order in the Renaissance. Structural analyses, Girard suggests, are ultimately tautological and even nihilistic: "the total of this operation always equals zero." We would be better off, Girard claims, to forego structuralism altogether and focus instead on the psychology of mimetic desire. But the forms of discourse cannot so simply be assimilated to sacrificial "rites"; they are actually a necessary feature of language and linguistic analysis. The claim that any particular form is sacrificial, valorizing certain terms and denigrating their opposites, is central to Deconstruction. And Bakhtin's carnivalesque, far from being "the form of what no longer has form," actually serves to counter the sacrificial in discourse, hence its popularity among poststructuralists.

We can further our dialogue here by considering Fyodor Dostoevsky, who constitutes a prime theoretical exemplar for Girard and Bakhtin, both of whom have a book devoted to him. For Girard, Dostoevsky provides acute insights into post-Christian Modernity and internal mediation. Bakhtin, on the other hand, finds a radically new form of the novel with Dostoevsky that he characterizes as "polyphonic." Rather surprisingly, Bakhtin seems to define polyphony as a technique in characterization rather than style or discourse (more on this below). In a polyphonic novel, the characters assume a certain independence such that they are not controlled by or subsumed under the author's perspective, as in previous novels; as a result, we respond "as if the character were not an object of authorial discourse, but rather a fully valid, autonomous carrier of his own individual words" (Bakhtin, *PDP* 5). Bakhtin writes,

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. Dostoevsky's major heroes are, by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse. In no way, then, can a character's discourse be exhausted by the usual functions of characterization and plot development, nor does it serve as a vehicle for the author's own ideological position (as with Byron, for instance). The consciousness of a character is given as someone else's consciousness, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned

into an object, is not closed, does not become a simple object of the author's consciousness. (*PDP* 6-7)What is the relationship of heteroglossia and polyphony? Bakhtin emphasizes the novelty of polyphony, calling it "a completely new type of artistic thinking," "a fundamentally new novelistic genre" (*PDP* 3, 7). At the same time, however, he acknowledges that polyphony is dialogic to an extreme degree:

In Dostoevsky's polyphonic novel we are dealing not with ordinary dialogic form, that is, with an unfolding of material within the framework of its own monologic understanding and against the firm background of a unified world of objects. No, here we are dealing with an ultimate dialogicality, that is, a dialogicality of the ultimate whole. (*PDP* 18)So there is a dialogic dimension to polyphony, although it is an extreme form, "an ultimate dialogicality," which leads one to suspect that polyphony is related more closely to heteroglossia than his insistence on polyphony's novelty might otherwise lead us to conclude. When tracing out the literary roots of the novel, he finds that dialogic artistic prose "leads to Dostoevsky" (*PDP* 109). Perhaps surprisingly, however, he admits that Dostoevsky's novels are not actually stylistically diverse in the ordinary sense; nevertheless, he maintains they include "dialogic relationships" which are "metalinguistic" (*PDP* 181). He explains,

Dostoevsky's works astound us first of all by their extraordinary diversity of types and varieties of discourse, types and varieties, moreover, that are present in their most extreme expression. Clearly predominant is vari-directional double-voiced discourse, in particular internally dialogized discourse and the reflected discourse of an other: hidden polemic, polemically colored confession, hidden dialogue. In Dostoevsky almost no word is without its intense sideward glance at someone else's word. At the same time there are almost no objectified words in Dostoevsky, since the speech of his characters is constructed in a way that deprives it of all objectification. What also astounds us is the continual and abrupt alternation of the most varied types of discourse. Sharp and unexpected transitions from parody to internal polemic, from polemic to hidden dialogue, from hidden dialogue to stylization in serene hagiographic tones, then back again to parodistic narration and finally to an extremely intense open dialogue—such is the agitated verbal surface of his works. (*PDP* 203)What Bakhtin describes here is discursive, but polyphony finds expression in the words of the characters and their dynamic and unexpected interactions, leading him to describe polyphony in terms of character. Paradoxically, what makes the characters seem so independent (of authorial control) is their deeply dialogical (or mimetic, in Girardian terms) relationship to others.

Polyphony and heteroglossia share some structural features. Just as discourses have their own life independent of the author in heteroglossia, so the characters in polyphony have their own life independent of the author; and there is no master

discourse or perspective which governs the various discourses and characters—leading to the “unfinalizability” (*PDP* 252) which some critics have identified as the heart of Bakhtin’s theoretical project. Of course, in a novel, even character is ultimately discursive; so we are justified, I believe, in viewing polyphony as another, more intense, variety of heteroglossia. If so, then Bakhtin’s theory of the novel remains centered on heteroglossia. If heteroglossia is defined by heterogeneity, we shouldn’t be surprised that there is more than one type of heteroglossia.

We need to go further into what Bakhtin means by the “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” in polyphony. In practical terms, I would submit, this means that characters act and speak in unpredictable ways, and as a result are hard to classify as unambiguously good or evil. Furthermore, major characters often have distinct, more or less developed ideological and sometimes philosophical perspectives. Wayne Booth sees polyphony as an issue of realism or objectivity (xx). In other words, people really are independent and unpredictable, and Dostoevsky is faithful to this basic human reality. Polyphony is “realistic” in the sense that it is rooted in an important anthropological insight, but ultimately polyphony is an aesthetic effect, similar to what Freud calls the uncanny. Simply put, Dostoevsky’s characters have an uncanny liveliness to them. In Freud’s famous essay on the uncanny, he mentions the theory of Ernst Jentsch, who traces the uncanny experience to an unresolvable “uncertainty . . . [about] whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton” (Freud 227). Freud comments that Jentsch’s theory is accurate as far as it goes but is more descriptive than analytical. What is needed, however, is not Freud’s Oedipus theory but rather Girard’s anthropology of desire. As per Jentsch, the uncanny involves the ambiguous animation of something non-living, often a doll or a dead person. What “animates” things or people, making them uncanny, is desire. In Eric Gans’s Originary Hypothesis, on the originary scene, the mimetic desires of the humans are projected onto the central object, a dead animal which becomes, for the group, ambiguously animate. Desire is precisely the uncanny in Girard’s theory, the most familiar but also the most “other” or threatening (Cf. Freud’s analysis of the German word *Unheimlich*). Desire is “animated” because mimesis seems to operate by itself, without conscious intention, and thus erupts in strange and unexpected ways. The uncanny is typically found in surreal literature but can be produced by certain realist works also. As a literary effect in Dostoevsky’s novels, a character becomes uncanny when we thought we had them identified as a type (the “automaton” in Jentsch’s definition), but they act in an unexpected way, asserting the centrality of their own uncanny desire, which is modeled on our own (or the protagonist’s, with whom we identify), yet uncanny because threatening. Only Girard’s theory gives a convincing explanation of how alterity can be based on sameness: “The more desire aspires to difference, the more it generates identity” (*TDBB* 96). The mimetic desire

of the other is modeled on our own, but that very sameness produces the threat of conflict and violence, the perception of alterity. The destabilizing oscillation of attraction and repulsion is essentially mimetic. Again we see that Girard supplies what is missing with Bakhtin. Girard's thesis that Dostoevsky is the premier psychologist of mimetic desire in Modernity is entirely convincing. Polyphony ultimately concerns Dostoevsky's novel representation of a world decentered by desire; traditionally a fictional cosmos is structured around the desire of the protagonist, to which everything else is subordinated, either in opposition or support. The real world is not like this, of course, which is one reason why we have different expectations for life and fiction. But what makes Dostoevsky's polyphony so compelling is not its realism (fidelity to experience), but its disruption of our narrative expectations through a hypermimeticism among the characters. Polyphony includes the desire of the reader in its dialogical transmutations (more on this below). As Bakhtin notes, Dostoevsky's characters often seem to know what the other is thinking, even when they can't admit to themselves that such is their thought. For example, when Alyosha, in *The Brother's Karamazov*, tells Ivan that Ivan is not guilty for their father's death (Bakhtin, *PDP* 255). Another uncanny mimetic effect is the paranoia rampant in Dostoevsky's works, e.g. *The Eternal Husband* and *The Double*. Dostoevsky's characters are continually haunted by the voice of the other. Bakhtin comments on the underground man (from *Notes from the Underground*): "In everything he senses above all someone else's will predetermining him" (*PDP* 236). Bakhtin's reading of Dostoevsky requires Girard's mimetic theory to support it.

Girard observes that Dostoevsky's mature novels take place in a contemporary world in which "men become gods for each other." In other words, men have generally abandoned God and religion, and with those, the possibility of transcendence. The Christian revelation has the ironic effect of ushering in secular Modernity by dissolving the old sacrificial order. Without God as an external mediator, humans take each other for mediators, creating the rampant rivalry found in Dostoevsky's works. Girard pays close attention to Dostoevsky's personal history, and he views *Notes from the Underground* as Dostoevsky's first mature work, demonstrating that he had overcome his youthful romanticism. The narrator of *Notes from the Underground* is so mimetic that he views virtually everyone as a rival and obstacle; he sees their indifference as a personal insult, a challenge. Anyone who views him with sympathy, like the prostitute Liza, becomes for that reason worthless in his eyes. The underground man suffers simultaneously from excessive vanity, delusions of grandeur, and the most abject inferiority complex. He demonstrates with great clarity the slavery involved in mimeticism. Girard argues cogently that the value placed on freedom by the underground man (and taken up by existentialists), his refutation of rationalism, is a red herring. The underground man is not free at all; even though he acts contrary to his rational self-interest,

everything he does is intended to impress the “other” in one way or another; he is enslaved to what he imagines that others think about him.

Bakhtin’s interpretation of *Notes from the Underground* is in some ways quite similar: “The Underground Man remains in his inescapable opposition to the ‘other person'” (*PDP* 254). Everything he says and does constantly anticipates, and resists, what others might say and think about him:

What he fears most of all is that people might think he is repenting before someone, that he is asking someone’s forgiveness, that he is reconciling himself to someone else’s judgment or evaluation, that his self-affirmation is somehow in need of affirmation and recognition by another. . . . But precisely in this act of anticipating the other’s response and in responding to it he again demonstrates to the other (and to himself) his own dependence on this other. He fears that the other might think he fears that other’s opinion. But through this fear he immediately demonstrates his own dependence on the other’s consciousness, his own inability to be at peace with his own definition of self. With his refutation, he confirms precisely what he wishes to refute, and he knows it. (*PDP* 227)Bakhtin’s analysis here advances Girard’s interpretation, although without the central mechanism of mimetic desire. But Bakhtin also adds important insight not found in Girard. In the underground man’s confession, Bakhtin identifies a peculiar rhetorical feature he calls the “loophole” (*PDP* 233):

A loophole is the retention for oneself of the possibility for altering the ultimate, final meaning of one’s own words. If a word retains such a loophole this must inevitably be reflected in its structure. This potential other meaning, that is, the loophole left open, accompanies the word like a shadow. Judged by its meaning alone, the word with a loophole should be an ultimate word and does present itself as such, but in fact it is only the penultimate word and places after itself only a conditional, not a final, period. (*PDP* 233)The underground man is constantly anticipating every possible reaction, objection, or other possible interpretation to what he says, and includes them all in his discourse. The result is that everything he says becomes conditional. He is impossible to pin down to any position. And this “unfinalizability” is finally the underground man’s most important characteristic. He resists every possible definition of himself, so that he can’t be identified even as a character in a novel. The underground man consciously resists the reader’s desire for closure or even understanding. For Bakhtin, there is an implicit self-referential dimension to the underground man (and all Dostoevsky’s heroes):

The Underground Man not only dissolves in himself all possible fixed features of his person, making them all the object of his own introspection, but in fact he no longer has any such traits at all, no fixed definitions, there is nothing to say about him, he

figures not as a person taken from life but rather as the subject of consciousness and dream. And for the author as well he is not a carrier of traits and qualities that could have been neutral toward his self-consciousness and could have finalized him; no, what the author visualizes is precisely the hero's self-consciousness and the inescapable open-endedness, the vicious circle of that self-consciousness. (*PDP* 51)In the above passage, Dostoevsky elaborates on what he means by polyphony, and what I call the uncanny dimension of his characters, which is properly meta-fictional. The underground man is continually surprising everyone, including himself and his author; at the same time he is utterly predictable in his obsessions. He is a fictional character, who by definition is fixed by the words of the author. In that sense, he is a doll, an inanimate body, a puppet. But he continually exceeds the boundaries of the fiction, taking on uncanny life. He is surrounded by doubles, of course, everyone whom he takes for rivals; but he is also his own double; his character includes the other within himself, leading to what Bakhtin notes as the "inescapable *perpetuum mobile* of the dialogicized self-consciousness" (*PDP* 230).

Mikhail Bakhtin and René Girard have produced two highly original theories of the novel genre, along with brilliant analyses of particular novels. They both take Dostoevsky as a primary example for their theories, and as we saw, their readings of his novels bear significant similarities. We may wonder if Christianity is a common thread connecting these three authors. Bakhtin was accused by the Soviet authorities of participation in a prohibited Russian Orthodox group, but there is no certain evidence one way or another, and his religious convictions remain an open question. His sympathy for the profoundly Christian writer Dostoevsky, however, is probably not coincidental in this regard. The Christian anthropology of fallen humankind, subject to rivalry and conflict, may be a decisive factor for both Bakhtin's and Girard's theories. Bakhtin and Dostoevsky were also influenced by Christian utopianism, but we have seen that mimetic rivalry is the anthropological subtext of Heteroglossia and Polyphony. Bakhtin's theory of language and the novel requires to be supplemented with Girard's theory of desire. And both Girard and Bakhtin suffer from the lack of any rigorous understanding of language, its ethical function in deferring violence and the scenic nature of representation. Their work, however, remains irreplaceable for scholars of the novel and Modernity.

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Notes

1. See Cesáreo Bandera on the time needed for the West to grasp the radical nature of the Christian Revelation, *The Sacred Game*, p. 234. (back)

2. For Bandera's Girardian reading of Medieval and Renaissance literature, see *The Sacred Game* and *A Refuge of Lies*. (back)

3. For the New Testament references to Satan driving out Satan, see Mark 3.22-26, Matthew 12.24-28, and Luke 11.15-20. (back)

4. But see Peter Goldman, "The Meaning of Meaning in Kafka's *The Castle*." (back)

5. For a different critique of Girard on individualism, see Andrew O'Shea's *Selfhood and Sacrifice*. Briefly, he argues that Girard's critique of individualism, by itself, is nihilistic, since it allows the individual no agency or real identity. Girard's theory of conversion is meant to address this impasse, but O'Shea argues the old self of conversion is constructed as an "other" whose sacrifice enables the literary community to continue. (back)

6. On the importance of individualism for the emergence of the novel, see Ian Watt's classic and still useful account *The Rise of the Novel*. (back)

7. For a brief overview of the Originary Hypothesis and Generative Anthropology, see Peter Goldman, "Why Generative Anthropology" (back)