

The Comedy of Desire: Four Variations and a Coda in Homage to René Girard

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1. The Unenviable Position

"The triangle of desire," writes Girard in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, "scarcely interests anyone but vaudevillians and novelists of genius," (MRVR, p. 115). With this thought in mind, I would like to examine what initially struck me as an enigmatic passage in *Les Origines de la culture*, the French translation of the book-length interview with Girard conducted by Pierpaolo Antonello and João Cezar de Castro Rocha. Girard is making his patented comparison between Proust's *Jean Santeuil* and *La Recherche*, and in attempting to define the difference between the two works, the first of which is an unfinished youthful novel, while the second is of course the masterpiece, he says the following: "*comme un bon comédien, l'écrivain sait qu'il ne peut écrire de la bonne littérature qu'à ses dépens, en mettant en avant son propre désir mimétique*" (230). Translation: "like a good actor, the writer knows that he can only write good literature at his own expense, by putting his own mimetic desire 'out there'."

For some time I was puzzled by this reference to an actor. There were ways to account for it, given that Proust devoted some memorable pages to the genius of the stage actress La Berma, but the sentence still seemed obscure. Then I read *Evolution and Conversion*, the original English edition. There I found the following: "like a good comedian, the Proust of *La Recherche* knows that he can write good literature only at his own expense, at the expense of his own mimetic desire" (176). The discrepancy between original and translation at the end of the sentence can be explained by the French reluctance to repeat words—no doubt "at his own expense" followed by "at the expense of" raised a red flag. The translation of comedian by *comédien*, instead of as "*comique*" or "*humoriste*" (stand-up comedian), is also easily explained by the false cognate. There's another possible explanation, however: the comparison of Proust to a stand-up comedian is startling because stand-up comedy and the exquisite novelistic art of the great French author seem to operate on such different cultural planes. It's as if the translator were unwilling to believe that Girard could be referring in the same breath to an icon of world literature and a vulgar form of popular entertainment.

Whatever the reason for the mistranslation, the reference to stand-up comedy made the sentence seem a bit clearer. But it was only when I stumbled upon a passage in *Des choses*

cachées depuis la fondation du monde that everything was finally illuminated.

The passage comes toward the end of *Des choses cachées*, in the context of a discussion of Proust, Freud, and narcissism. For Girard, Freud's theory of narcissism ascribes too much reality to the phenomenon, which in Proust's great novel is revealed as a mask donned for the purposes of amorous or social strategizing, or as an illusion projected onto the apparent indifference of a group of girls or socialites. In the earlier *Jean Santeuil*, however, the narcissistic position was given more consistency. The main character was shown hobnobbing with aristocrats beneath the envious gaze of his snobbish enemies, "living the dream"—a dream in which Proust, by the time he wrote *La Recherche*, had ceased to believe.

Girard analyzes the well-known passage in the second volume of *La Recherche* in which Marcel first encounters "the little band" of girls, among whom, although he does not yet know her, is his future mistress Albertine. Intimidated and fascinated by the athletic bodies strolling nonchalantly together down the beach, the rather sickly and over-intellectual Marcel sees in them the embodiment of self-contentment, and longs to join this enchanted circle of scornful and immodest teenagers. It is at this point that Girard makes some remarks about Freud's vision of the professional humorist:

Freud ascribes a formidable narcissism to the comedian. Freud conceives professional humor as mockery at the audience's expense, as an expulsion of the audience. In reality, the opposite is true: if the stand-up comic behaved like the little band, he wouldn't make the audience laugh. There is nothing laughable about the little band for the narrator; it's fascinating, terrifying, but certainly not laughable. To make the audience laugh, you have to make them laugh at your own expense, and it is Proust, of course, who is right. . . . To make others laugh, one must find oneself, or place oneself deliberately, in the position of the victim . . .

When Girard says "victim" here, I don't think he means the consenting victim, the Lamb of God, who is expelled because he refuses violence. Rather he means the victim of mimetic desire. The latter repeatedly finds himself excluded from a group not because the group is particularly bent on excluding him, but because his desire transfigures precisely the most unwelcoming groups and individuals. So Girard means that instead of occupying the unassailable "narcissistic" position, instead of trying to fascinate the audience, the successful comedian has to place himself in the position of the one who desires—and believes in—the ineffable bliss of being welcomed into the closed narcissistic circle: "*la petite bande*" of insolent girls on the beach in Balbec or the carriage in which Odette disappears with Forcheville and the Verdurins to the horror of Charles Swann in *Swann in Love*.

The simple sentence from *Evolution and Conversion* compresses a wealth of insight into just

a few words. Girard paints a picture of the author as someone who uses his own mimetic desire as material for a comic performance. But is the comparison accurate? Is Girard right about professional comedians?

I know of one stand-up comedian who deliberately places himself “in the position of the victim,” with exactly the results Girard predicts: the French-speaking comic Gad Elmaleh. Known to American audiences for a small role in Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris*, Elmaleh has enjoyed success on stage with “The Blond,” a stand-up routine about envy. Being “blond,” according to Elmaleh, is not primarily about the color of one’s hair; it’s something more essential, a state of mind, even a “concept.” The Blond is the successful other guy whose achievements and aplomb put each of us to shame. Muscular, successful, and chic, the Blond never makes a mess when he eats a sandwich. He isn’t afraid of flying. His kids are perfectly obedient. At the ski resort, the Blond flies down the most difficult slopes, eliciting cries of admiration from one and all (and especially from the comedian’s own girlfriend). Meanwhile, Elmaleh himself struggles to get off the chair lift without falling down.

If Elmaleh speaks of the blond as a “concept,” this is because in reality the Blond does not exist as such. His apparent perfection is a figment of the comedian’s desire, a chimera that exists only when viewed from the outside, from the envious perspective, much like the little group’s apparently narcissistic outward closure in Proust’s novel. The Blond himself, if one were to question him, might boast of his achievements and let us believe in his perfect mastery. Deep down, however, he no doubt also has his Blond—a perpetually victorious rival whom he is unable to surpass.

The success of Elmaleh’s material depends on the nonexistence of the Blond as a concrete individual and his universal existence as an archetype of frustrating otherness. “Blondness” is everywhere and nowhere, a mirage of desire. Today’s social media are a good example. Studies have shown that spending extended periods on Facebook breeds unhappiness: we know that our own lives bear only a passing resemblance to the selectively edited versions of them that we present to the world, but we cannot shake the suspicion that everyone else’s flattering photos reflect an objectively blissful existence we will never attain. To avoid looking like the hapless exception to the rule, we post photos of ourselves in only the most desirable situations (“Look at me in these awesome seats at the concert!”). We strive to be “blond” in order not to be excluded from the happy circle of “blondness.”

The key to the comedian’s routine is the way the characters are positioned with respect to each other: as Elmaleh recounts his humiliating encounters with his unflappable, multi-talented nemesis, we experience everything from the normal guy’s insecure vantage point, while the Blond remains a cipher, his gaze masked by reflecting ski sunglasses, his demeanor cool and self-composed.

If Elmaleh were to rewrite his material from the Blond's perspective, his routine would fall flat. Tranquil and content, the object of admiring glances on the slopes as he soared gracefully off a ski jump, the Blond would once again bask in the flattering attention of beautiful women and wealthy jet-setters, while the average Joes (and their girlfriends) contemplated him with envy in their hearts. But this time the comedian would take on the Blond's role. He would make fun of the losers who fear flying or can't perform a schussboom without ending up in a snowdrift. He would relate his languorous fireside conversation in the ski lodge with a famous actress who gave him her room number. Mere boasting, however, likely wouldn't make anyone laugh.

"One day," Gad Elmaleh solemnly vows at the end of his stand-up routine, "one day, ladies and gentlemen—I will be the Blond." The vow hovers between naïveté and self-mockery. The comedian plainly understands that the Blond is nothing more than a figment of a perpetual longing for mastery—blondness is forever unattainable. But the final pirouette would not be so funny if the vow were not also deeply sincere. The comedian serves himself and his desire up as sacrificial offerings for the audience's enjoyment. And if Girard likens Proust to a stand-up comedian, perhaps Elmaleh is in turn more Proustian than one might suspect. His current girlfriend, after all, is Charlotte Casiraghi, eighth in line to the throne of Monaco...

2. The Dialectic of Vanity

With NBC's *Cruel Intentions* revival in the works, the world of French libertines is poised to make a comeback on the American cultural scene. Meanwhile, overseas, Christopher Hampton's *Dangerous Liaisons*, a theatrical adaptation of Laclos' novel, is enjoying a successful run at the National Theatre in London. These productions fit neatly into our cultural moment of dating apps and sexual assault, tapping into our aspirations to sexual fulfillment and our fears of coercion and excess. They also testify to our ongoing fascination with the character of the *seducer*, coolly exerting a magnetic charm over his numerous conquests, who in virtue of their multiplicity necessarily mean less to him than he does to each of them. At Yale University's annual "Sex Week" in 2008, writes Helen Andrews in *First Things*, one of the featured speakers was a professional pick-up artist named Matador "hawking his 'Mystery Method' for seducing women." The lecture was apparently well attended, suggesting that our contemporary obsession with sex is only partly about sex. Still deeper needs are at stake, beginning with the need to feel desired and desirable in a world of uneasy relations between the sexes. Becoming a "player" offers a solution to the problem of the modern male ego lost in the vast crowd of modern male egos. Sex is a side benefit, perhaps, but it may not always be the primary goal.

As René Girard taught us long ago, however, using love as a tool for self-aggrandizement comes with its own set of risks. "Modern vanity," he writes in a 1959 article that, incredibly, has scarcely aged—a testament to Girard's insights, but also to a general socio-cultural stagnation—"dreads nothing more than sheer indifference." Becoming and staying divinely

invulnerable is hard work. The slightest misstep could lead to rejection, which in a world of limitless freedom is impossible not to take personally. In the zero-sum game of seduction, each partner strives to impress his or her disdain upon the other, who is simultaneously doing the same back. The first to flinch is consumed by what Girard describes as “a weird fascination,” which may result—for example—in an ill-advised volley of text messages or an overly effusive email. The other’s feigned indifference, offered credible support by this show of interest, may then cease to be merely an act. “Since the two partners are haunted by the same mirage of divine autonomy, the first who reveals his desire will never be desired, and he will see his dependence turn into utter enslavement” (36-37). Little wonder that so many adolescents today take prescription medications for anxiety. The more one seeks to imitate the chilly mastery of the Vicomte de Valmont and his modern epigones, the more one is exposed to the danger of an inopportune and humiliating obsession.

In a popular song entitled “Vade Retro Telephone,” the French singer-songwriter Bénabar offers a candid look at the tribulations of modern love. A young man has just left a young woman’s apartment after having spent a first night with her. He wants some confirmation that she is as interested as he is (that they have just slept together is no guarantee). He longs to call her but fears coming off as clingy, so vows to wait at least three days before giving in to his desire:

Le combiné dans les mains j’hésite et je raccroche
Pas pressé d’ passer pour celui qui s’accroche
Fébrile et collant ça donne pas vraiment envie
Lointain et distant, j’ sais pas pourquoi mais c’est sexy
Même si je ne pense qu’à elle, si je rêve de la revoir
Vade retro téléphone, elle ne doit pas le savoir
Nos meilleurs techniciens se sont penchés sur la formule
C’est trois jours au moins le résultat de leurs calculs

The receiver in my hands, I hesitate and hang up
In no hurry to come off as the one who’s been hooked
Feverish and clingy isn’t exactly a turn-on
Far away and distant—I don’t know why, but it’s sexy
Even if all I can think about is her, and seeing her again
Vade retro telephone, I can’t let her know this
Our best technicians have looked into the formula
Three days at least is the result of their calculations

The song’s title, which refers back in a secular mode to the medieval formula for exorcism (and possibly also to Mark 8:33—“Get behind me, Satan!”), suggests that the temptation to call is a grave one, with high stakes. Should the young man succumb, he will compromise

not only the woman's perception of him as a paragon of virile self-sufficiency, but also his own peace of mind. The agony of self-denial is preferable to the still more acute suffering of knowing that one has lost the upper hand through a shameful lack of will-power.

The Bénabar song humorously addresses the predicament faced by young people navigating love relationships in a world where the old rules no longer apply. When divorced from yesterday's courtship rituals and the moral constraints that accompanied them, lovers can no longer pattern their behavior on a set of scripted moves. More than ever, they find themselves forced into taking their cues entirely from each other, which greatly increases the chances of miscommunication. One imagines, for example, that while the young man may think of her as serenely unruffled, the young woman in the song may be waiting for him to call as anxiously as he is contemplating the possible negative repercussions of doing so. The very delay by which he hopes to ward off her disdain could easily have the unintended consequence of convincing her that he is no longer interested. By the time he finally does get in touch, she may have decided to console herself with someone else.

In his introduction to a recent edition of Paul Tillich's *The Courage to Be*, Harvey Cox affirms that Tillich's phenomenology of anxiety still applies in the twenty-first century. "Researchers who observe how young people rely on their iPads, Facebook pages, and cell phones have noticed a certain jittery anxiety in their behavior," he notes (xvii). "Videos of such young people indicate that they grow tense and fidgety if they have to stop using their devices even for a short time. Have they missed a call or message? Should they send a text, however trivial, to someone, anyone?"

Cox sees their absorption in these exchanges as an attempt to avoid "facing the precariousness of their own being." In other words, as a mask for a deeper existential anguish. Bénabar's song points to a more concrete sort of anxiety, generated less by uncertainty about the meaning of everything than by doubts about one's own worth as reflected in others' opinions and perceptions. The screens of our devices are mirrors in which we contemplate a self-image perpetually subject to judgments over which we can exert at best only partial control. In the domain of love, where personal investments are strongest, the resultant anguish has the potential to become extraordinarily intense.

The problem posed by the dialectic of vanity and the non-reciprocity of desire is almost entirely missing from current discussions of sexual libertarianism. This is all the more surprising in light of the prevalence of the latter topic. From Tom Wolfe's 2004 *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, a neo-naturalist satire of contemporary campus life, to articles on sexual assault and the campus hookup culture in newspapers, magazines, and online media outlets, sex—and especially sex on campus—has occupied a privileged place in our national consciousness over the last decade or so. Some of these stories suggest an epidemic of casual sexual encounters at the expense of long-term, committed coupling. Others downplay the phenomenon, which seems to involve only a minority, or even spring to the defense of

casual sex. Newspaper headlines blame the hookup culture for campus sexual assault; college professors publish their research on hooking up in academic journals.

Though there is no consensus on the meaning and value of the hookup culture, the academic literature, as surveyed in one article in the *Review of General Psychology*, points to “the entanglement of more intimate and emotional aspects with sex” and “competing interests at multiple levels” that “result in young adults having to negotiate multiple desires, and multiple social pressures” (161–176).

Might the Girardian dilemma of the seducer have some part in all this? Could the anguish of rejection and the fraught quest for invulnerability be lurking somewhere behind the various “competing interests” and “multiple desires”? The scholarly literature offers only vague answers. The studies reveal contradictory motives for and attitudes toward no-strings-attached sex. The very men who deliberately pursue such encounters confess to harboring deeply ambivalent feelings about them. Women frequently initiate hookups yet often regret having done so. A brief tour of the literature leaves one with the suspicion that the hookup culture, far from simplifying the pursuit of sexual pleasure, has brought a host of unintended complications in its wake.

3. How (Not) to Write a Girardian Novel

The day after René Girard’s death in November 2015, novelist Mathias Enard was interviewed on French radio. He had just been awarded the Prix Goncourt for his novel *Boussole*, and he must have been in a generous frame of mind. Even so, his words in praise of Girard were effusive: “I am very touched by this death,” he said. “I discovered his thought rather late. . . . It was a revelation for me. More than a revelation, René Girard was a long infusion. . . . He offers keys to reading, doors to understanding, whether in books or in the world on a daily basis.” There followed a humorous admission: upon first encountering *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Enard thought he had found a secret recipe for producing great literature: “When one is a novelist,” he said, “necessarily [Girard’s book] almost takes on the appearance of a creative writing manual, in the sense that one says, ‘Oh, maybe if I take this in reverse I too could write like Proust or Dostoevsky by starting from this core insight about triangular desire.’ That’s the first reaction.”

Could a writer use Girard’s book to reverse-engineer a masterpiece? Let’s imagine an aspiring novelist at work in his seventh-floor walk-up in the fifth arrondissement of Paris. He’s a young American studying abroad, and he recently managed to get his hands on a copy of *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (in the original French, of course), which he read in only two days, neglecting to eat and bathe during that time. The book’s thesis about triangular desire is now burned into his brain’s neural networks. No longer does he want to be just any old novelist—he wants to be the sort of novelist that Girard would have written about, a novelist of genius. With great excitement, he sits down at his

desk to write a “triangular” novel, impatient to join the ranks of the literary giants—Cervantes, Dostoevsky, Stendhal...

When he thinks about it (his computer is still booting up), our aspiring writer is amazed not to have noticed triangular desire before having read Girard. It’s really so obvious, after all. To live in the bustling world he glimpses from the windows of his minuscule *chambre de bonne*—a world of celebrity spokespeople, extravagantly expensive contemporary art, and stock market bubbles—is to be exposed on a daily basis to Girard’s ideas writ large. Just watching people go by on the sidewalk is a lesson in the mimetic power of fashion...

But enough idle musing—the screen glows in front of him, and it’s time to get down to work. He types a few words and deletes them, wondering whether his novel should be about someone buying items they don’t need because of TV ads, or about a collector bidding millions on an abstract canvas to outdo a rival, or perhaps about an amateur investor who falls for the hype surrounding a stock just before the market crashes. Or maybe he should write about his friend Ludovic, who suffers from pathological jealousy?

He outlines a few ideas, but they feel remote from his own experience, and therefore arbitrary. So, without quite realizing he is doing so, he turns to his own life. And his memory comes up with... nothing, or at least nothing that could be characterized as triangular desire. Sure, he wanted more than anything in the world to get into Harvard when he was in high school, but that had nothing to do with prestige—Harvard was just a great place, with a gorgeous campus and exactly the right sort of classes and programs. As for aspiring to become a writer, that’s a dream he’s always cherished, probably from the womb. The writer’s life, all cafés and book signings, would, he believes, suit him perfectly. In the arena of love, he flatters himself that (unlike Ludovic) he’s something of a player, with a growing number of conquests to his credit. Deep down, it’s true, he pines after the girl he has come to think of as *the One*, who broke up with him three years back. Though she is now married and working for an NGO in South Africa, he still secretly hopes they will end up together.

But none of this has anything to do with mimetic desire. With a frown, he scratches his head. What to do? His eyes fall on his copy of *Mensonge romantique*, open on the desk beside his laptop to a chapter entitled “Technical Problems in Cervantes, Stendhal, and Flaubert.” Only a few minutes ago it all seemed so easy. The masterpiece was going to write itself. Now he’s stuck. He sighs, drums his fingers on the desk.

Then, in a flash, it occurs to him: why not write a novel about a young author who, in a world dominated by memes, trends, and hype, is immune to mimetic desire? Invulnerable to the ploys of advertising, indifferent to the shifting currents of fashion, his main character would be an original outlier in a world of sameness. Armed with René Girard’s theories, he would embark on a campaign to enlighten others about their enslavement to imitation. And in due course he would fall victim to the crowd’s rage, and end up a martyr to the very

mimetic passions he tried but tragically failed to cure. This idea strikes him as promising. Inspired, enthusiastic once more, he bends over the keyboard and begins to type...

Here we have a dualist narrative system, admittedly presented in a rather cartoonish way. Our Girardian novelist views the concept of mimetic desire as “a mere social satire,” a tendency Girard noted in *Anorexia and Mimetic Desire* (63). It is to him at once the most obvious thing in the world (the only reason Ludovic wants us to go to that nightclub is that it’s hard to get in!), and the most improbable (but my dream of getting into Harvard had nothing to do with selectivity or prestige); a bland truism (Ludovic always wants what he can’t have!), and a fantastical myth (when *I* want something that I can’t have, it’s not because I can’t have it—it’s because that thing is truly worth wanting). It depends on whether he’s looking around at others, or engaging in an inventory of his own desires.

We all tend to apply this sort of double standard. When scrutinizing our friends’ motives, we readily spot traces of mimeticism (“He’s only dating her because she comes from such a prominent family”; “He doesn’t actually like that painting, he just wants to see himself as an art connoisseur”). But when we contemplate our own behavior, we mistake the effects of mimetic desire for objective givens of the world around us: the obnoxious, self-involved heiress becomes our most compatible dream partner, and the abstract canvas an inexhaustible source of aesthetic bliss.

Of course, it’s entirely possible that the second cousin once removed of an impoverished branch of the Kennedy family tree *is* the One, and that the 12’ x 12’ black monochrome is worth every penny of the \$150,000 we spent on it. Who can say? What’s suspicious is not the idea that an object could possess unique and valuable qualities, but the systematic habit of ascribing others’ desires to triangular snobbery while professing the incorruptible authenticity of our own motives. The truth has trouble reaching us, as if the self were surrounded by an invisible force field. Little matter, then, that we have read Girard and know all about triangular desire. Like our expat novelist in his dismal garret, we reroute whatever knowledge we might acquire from *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* away from ourselves and toward others.

Mathias Enard eventually abandoned the idea that *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* could offer an alchemical formula for literary creation: “One realizes obviously that not only does [Girard’s book] go way beyond that,” he said, “but also my novelistic practice cannot be subordinated to a model, my novelistic practice... will resist my own attempt to theorize it.” He must have come to sense that the problem of creative writing goes deeper than a mere theoretical understanding of triangular desire. Learning to spot the effects of mediation around us is easy, especially in today’s world, where free-floating desires encounter a never-ending succession of models on the screens through which we filter our lives. The more challenging obstacle to producing good literature (or, for that matter, good literary criticism) is dualism, and, fundamentally, pride. The stories that pride whispers to us are the

very ones that found their way into our Girardian novelist's first literary effort. So long as he continues to believe in these specious alibis, he'll see himself as a shining exception to the otherwise implacable rule of desire.

4. The Process of Transfiguration

To my knowledge, the late historian Tony Judt wrote only once about René Girard, and then merely to mention him in passing at the beginning of an essay about trains published in *The New York Review of Books* in 2010:

According to literary theorist René Girard, we come to yearn for and eventually love those who are loved by others. I cannot confirm this from personal experience—I have a history of frustrated longings for objects and women who were palpably unavailable to me but of no particular interest to anyone else.

This short passage gives a serviceable definition of mimetic desire: we take cues from someone else about who to love, and the result is the well-known Girardian triangle composed of the desiring subject, the model of desire, and the object on which the desires of both converge. But does the triangular pattern hold true for everyone and every desire? Could there be other ways of desiring, which have nothing triangular about them? After all, if we are to believe Judt, he himself flouts the Girardian rule. His desire travels straight from subject to object; he is a Quixote without an Amadis, a Jules sans Jim. The theoretician of triangular desire is puzzled. According to everything he knows and believes, desire is unfailingly mimetic. To deny this is to fall prey to one of those self-serving myths of autonomy that Girard places under the heading of the *romantic lie*.

Why, then, does the self-deprecating portrait Judt sketches ring so true? His frustration is already funny; that he should be rejected by women nobody else wants is doubly so. By comparison, the idea of systematically falling for people others love sounds like the typical stuff of academic theory, or the implausible plot of some network sitcom. In two sentences, Judt manages to cast doubt on the applicability of triangular desire to his own love life. He plainly isn't trying to make himself look good—the account he gives of his “frustrated longings” places him in a less enviable position than would the relatively decorous “yearning” of the first sentence.

The mimetic triangle, however, has a way of rising from the ashes just when we thought it dead and buried. Take those “frustrated longings” for “palpably unavailable” women. In *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard examines this very pattern—a man gripped by fierce desire for a woman who, deploying the strategies of coquetry, withholds her affections from him. There is no rival, and apparently no triangle; the woman's indifference fuels the man's frustration. Without a third party to serve as “mediator,” how can Girard claim that this scenario meets the conditions for triangular desire? The author is prepared for this

objection: "...the presence of a rival," he writes in *Mensonge romantique*, "is not necessary, in sexual desire, for this desire to be qualified as triangular." We can conceive of a

triangle whose three vertices are occupied by the lover, the beloved, and the body of the beloved. Sexual desire, like all triangular desires, is always contagious. To speak of contagion is necessarily to speak of a second desire bearing on the *same* object as the original desire. To imitate the desire of one's lover is to desire *oneself* thanks to that lover's desire (110).

This idea can be turned around: to imitate the desire of one's mistress is to desire her thanks to her self-desire. Her unruffled glances and laconic text messages indicate cool self-possession. We gravitate to those who appear to love themselves; no third party is needed to complete the triangle formed of the frustrated intellectual repeatedly checking his cell phone, the objectively undesirable woman ("of no particular interest to anyone else"), and that same woman in her bewitching, maddening role as model of desire.

Put the two scenarios together—a woman who desires herself via the affirmation provided by her lover; and a lover who pines after his mistress thanks to her alluring self-desire—and a circular process of feedback reinforcement is set in motion. The man's desire bolsters the woman's; hers feeds into his. The more she pulls away, the more eagerly he pursues her. His phone calls come in bunches; his text messages multiply. Soon she is positively repelled. Her unavailability solidifies, becomes, to use Judt's word, "palpable." From the subject's perspective, she appears to withdraw into a world sealed off to him, whose hermetic outward closure is asserted all the more implacably the more he seeks to penetrate it. And so the scenario that seemed at first to have nothing to do with triangular desire can be accounted for in a plausible way with that very theory.

This is possible because triangular desire is a metaphor, not a physical configuration. The metaphor captures the workings of an intersubjective structure, and this structure explains how an objectively undesirable object could be perceived as intensely desirable. The novelists Girard analyzed in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* were "interested neither in the insignificant reality of the object nor even in the transfigured object," he wrote, "but in the process of transfiguration. The great novelist has always been that way. Cervantes is interested neither in the barber's basin nor in Mambrino's helmet. What he finds fascinating is that Don Quixote should confuse a mere barber's basin with Mambrino's helmet..." (221-222). The Girardian critic is fascinated neither by the woman of "no particular interest to anyone else" nor even by the woman for whom Tony Judt feels a "frustrated longing." He is interested in the process by which the first becomes the second (or by which the second reverts to the first).

Sufficient first-hand experience with this process can make the subject turn away from "easy" mediators and gravitate toward those—like the statue in *Don Giovanni*, as Jean-Pierre

Dupuy points out in a recent essay—who are hard and unforgiving. Thus do the most blasé and seemingly autonomous among us have a tendency to suffer the cruel torments of silence and disdain.

A case in point: Witold Gombrowicz's early short story, "Lawyer Kraykowski's Dancer," which tells of a young writer's encounter at the theater with a polished, well-dressed gentleman—Lawyer Kraykowski—who unceremoniously drags him to the back of the ticket line he has tried to cut, and coolly ignores him. By the next day the young man, who is also the story's narrator, has transformed the ferocious rival into an adored model: "Ah, ah—he was walking along and whistling and occasionally waving his cane, waving his cane... I immediately paid the check and followed him—and, admiring the slightly sinuous motion of his back, I reveled in the fact that he knew nothing of it, that this was my own, inside [...] Oh, I could have stared for hours at the place where his hair ended in an even line and his pale neck began" (6). With his back turned, Lawyer Kraykowski is in a little Olympian world all his own; the young writer is excluded from the circle, wallowing in his own interiority ("this was my own, inside"). But the narrator stands beyond his former self. He has enough sense of humor to admit that what was inside was not, in fact, his own. To convey this he describes a restaurant scene:

[Lawyer Kraykowski] didn't pay me the slightest attention; he devoted himself to the ladies, leaning toward them, then looked about, scrutinizing the other women there. He spoke slowly, with relish, looking through the menu:

"Hors d'oeuvre, caviar... mayonnaise...poularde...pineapple for dessert—black coffee, Pommard, Chablis, brandy and liqueurs."

I ordered:

"Caviar—mayonnaise—poularde—pineapple for dessert—black coffee, Pommard, Chablis, brandy and liqueurs" (7).

Gombrowicz's punctuation is as eloquent as are the duplicate orders: the ellipses in Lawyer Kraykowski's speech indicate pauses, reflection; the dashes in the protagonist's indicate the mechanical repetition of what came before, the absence of thought—pure imitation. The story goes on to narrate a bizarre episode of self-defeating sexual generosity. In a striking illustration of triangular ambivalence, the narrator does everything in his power to further Lawyer Kraykowski's affair with a doctor's wife—but once he discovers them embracing on a park bench he shouts the secret of their adultery to the world, forcing them apart. The story concludes with the narrator, now hospitalized due to his exertions, vowing: "I'll follow him! Yes, I'll follow him! Everywhere I shall follow that guiding star of mine! But it's unclear whether I'll return alive from the journey; these emotions are too strong. I may die suddenly on the street, by the fence, and in such a case—a card must be written—they should send my body to Lawyer Kraykowski" (16). The story turns out to be a last will and testament in

which the subject “leaves himself,” as it were, to the mediator!

Lawyer Kraykowski is an ordinary Polish gentleman; it is the protagonist of Gombrowicz’s story who mistakes him for a living deity. Although it is grafted onto the geographical Faubourg Saint-Germain, through which you and I can walk today in the eastern part of the 7th arrondissement of Paris, the magical “Faubourg Saint-Germain” exists purely in the mind of the Proustian snob. What fascinated Gombrowicz, what fascinated Proust, is that a mere lawyer could be perceived as a terrible god, or that for a time, long after the French nobility had lost its political power, *le Faubourg* could have shimmered in the eyes of a young aesthete gazing at the *hôtels particuliers* on the Rue de Varenne.

5. Coda: The Magic of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*

Stendhal, Girard observes in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, tried to write comedies like his literary hero Molière. He failed, but those years of effort “transformed his soul.” He eventually renounced his dream of becoming a playwright, but not his goal of becoming a great comic author. “All novelistic works tend toward laughter,” writes Girard, praising the satirical humor of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, the comic genius of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Proust’s crowning achievement, he says, is his most bitterly funny character, the proto-Dostoevskian Baron de Charlus.

Girard’s own criticism is notable not only for the elegance of its prose and the beauty of its images (who can forget the fable of the man who, unwilling to believe the treasure he is seeking is nowhere to be found, looks for it under a boulder too heavy to lift?), but also for its sense of humor. This is not a matter of “laugh lines” or any of the usual *effets de manche* of comic writing. It’s a sort of glow that lights up every corner of the essayistic space. It intensifies here or there, perhaps, as in the analysis of the bidding war between de Rênal and Valenod in *The Red and the Black* or in the comparison between the underground man’s look-at-me-not-paying-attention-to-you histrionics and the clench-jawed anti-rhetoric of *l’écriture blanche*. In the main, however, the comic quality of Girard’s essay is thoroughgoing, an unbroken texture.

This ability to transform mimetic desire into literary-critical comedy is, I believe, the single most important source of the magic in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. It is connected to the exceptional rigor with which Girard depicts the laws of mimetic desire. “There are in Balzac many intuitions parallel to those of the novelists studied in this book,” Girard writes. “But the web in which the desiring subject is trapped is full of rents through which often enough the author himself or his personal representatives slip. In the novelists we have chosen to study the cloth is so closely woven, the thread so strong that it is impossible for anyone to escape the unyielding laws of desire without escaping the desire itself.” (168). The same can be said of *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Patterns take precedence over anomalies, sameness over difference. Impersonal forces trump the self-determination of the individual

will. The daisy chain of unrequited desire in Racine's *Andromache* is emphasized at the expense of the precious singularity of each isolated love story; the drawing rooms of Proust become a series of worlds orbiting around one another like the gears in a machine of snobbery. Childish imitation, sexual sadomasochism, political partisanship, economic activity, advertising, and coquetry are all explained by means of the same simple principle of human relations. The arabesques of desire, like the topiary hedges in a parterre garden, are perfectly symmetrical. There is no flaw in the chain-mail, no breach through which a spontaneous desire might be allowed to wriggle free.

But this rigor comes at a price. "The observer," Girard writes, "*does not want to descend, in the truth of desire, all the way to the point where this truth would concern himself just as much as the subject of his observations*" (187). If Girard had not himself faced the resistance he describes, he would not have been able to testify so convincingly to its strength. If he had not also eventually overcome it, he would not have been able to write *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*.

In a radio interview with Robert Harrison, Girard explained how his own early amorous relationships helped him to write his first book. After he turned down a girlfriend who wanted marriage, she got over him, at which point he found himself drawn to her once more. When she wanted commitment, her desire fueled his narcissism, making him wary of giving in; but when she denied herself to him, his self-love collapsed. The current of desire switched direction and began to flow away from him and back toward her. It was then that he realized she was his model of desire.

Girard's remarks suggest something both obvious and difficult to grasp, namely that the literary comedy that is *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* would have been impossible had Girard held himself aloof from the laws of desire. The magic of his work is inseparable from his willingness to sacrifice his vanity for the sake of truthfully representing those laws.

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