

**RENÉ GIRARD AND THE EXORCISM
OF THE POSSESSED CONSUMER**

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Introduction

René Girard is perhaps best known for tracing the origins of human culture to religion and the origins of religion to violence and to the scapegoat mechanism, but he also traces the origins of this foundational violence to mimetic desire, contagion, and rivalry. Though perhaps I could be accused of seeking to conceal the violence that Girard has so painstakingly uncovered, I wish to focus exclusively on his mimetic theory and its relevance to consumerism, emphasizing not the violence that results from mimesis, which Girard himself has done extensively, but instead the loss of identity that can result from mimesis in a consumer society. I will first present Girard's theory of desire, giving special attention to its implications for identity development. I will then discuss more directly both his limited, explicit treatment of consumerism and the unspoken ways in which his theory can elucidate the situation of the consumer, focusing on how consumer society may manage to prevent the violence that often results from mimetic contagion, but does nothing to prevent what Girard calls "metaphysical desire." Finally, I will turn to Girard's analysis of novelistic and Christian conversions and suggest how these conversions may be seen as salvific alternatives to consumerism. By rehearsing and reconstructing Girard's theory, I hope to develop an effective tool for critiquing consumer society and for advocating Christian compassion and humility as the means of allowing identities stunted by consumerism to flourish.

Mimetic Desire

Girard is by no means the first thinker to place great emphasis on the role of imitation in human development and education. Learning is always based on imitation.¹ Without it, there could be no culture. Plato was well aware of imitation's significance, but he ignored its role in regard to any appropriative behavior,² thereby ignoring the kind of imitation that leads inevitably to conflict.³ Freud delves deeply into the subject of desire, but fails to appreciate the mimetic role of desire because of his emphasis on the role of the object. According to Girard, Freud imagines that the triangle of rivalry conceals an "oedipal" secret and thus does not discern the rivalry's mimetic character, which the triangle really conceals. Freud then, like Plato, fails to grasp that the "mimetic is itself a desire and is therefore the real 'unconscious.'"⁴ Dostoevsky, on the other hand, gives desire no primary privileged object. Rather, he portrays desire choosing its object through the mediation of another. Desire then is first of all a "desire of and for the

¹ Robert Frank writes of newborns imitating their mothers' facial expressions and of the continued importance of peer behavior as a source of standards for mature adults. He says that the herd instinct in humans "seems a consequence of the inherited structures of our nervous system." While acknowledging some negative consequences of imitative behavior, he emphasizes its usefulness in "helping people make their way through a complex and uncertain world." At times, humans may imitate, not in order to be similar to others, but because of a fear that the others' information is better than one's own. See *Passions within Reason: The Strategic Role of the Emotions* (New York: Norton, 1988), 155 and *Choosing the Right Pond: Human Behavior and the Quest for Status* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 17-19. Tibor Scitovsky notes the discomfort of the young in many species, including human beings, when left alone or excluded from group activities. He focuses on the importance of imitation for "gaining and maintaining acceptance and membership in the group. Most people are aware of the strength of this drive in their children, though they are much less aware of it in themselves. Yet the power of precedent, custom, fashion, mass movements all testify to the great strength in man of the desire to imitate and conform to the behavior of the group he belongs to or wants to belong to." See *The Joyless Economy: The Psychology of Human Satisfaction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 114-15.

² René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978), 8.

³ René Girard, *"To Double Business Bound": Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 201.

⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 295, 359.

other.”⁵ Dostoyevsky, reflecting the true hierarchy of desire, places the mediator in the foreground. In *The Eternal Husband*, the hero tries to convince the reader that his relationship to the object is independent of the mediator, but this is obviously not the case.⁶ Freud seems to have come close to seeing the role of mimesis in desire, but he always opted for his Oedipal theory instead. He recognized that the Oedipus complex could not account for all the phenomena that Girard claims are accounted for by “the process of mimetic rivalry, with the model first metamorphosing into an idol and then turning into an obstacle and a hateful persecutor, which reinforces his sacred status.”⁷ But he remained fixated on the mother-object.

The key to desire for Girard does not lie in the object as it does for Freud, but neither does it lie in the desiring subject. Modernity has often glorified the innate spontaneity of desire, but according to Girard, this is “a purely mythological notion.”⁸ Indeed, he calls the conviction that desires are individual and spontaneous the “dearest of all our illusions.”⁹ The subject swears that she began desiring before the rival ever appeared, but she is lying. The third party in the triangle is really the subject herself.¹⁰ The subject must be last because, after satisfying their basic needs, humans do not know what to desire.¹¹ The subject has no instinct to guide her or any desire that is

⁵ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 39.

⁶ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 45-46.

⁷ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 411.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁹ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, ix.

¹⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 339.

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard makes the same point: “[B]eyond the threshold of survival, man no longer knows what he wants.” Baudrillard concludes that there is no “vital anthropological minimum,” for “in all societies, it is determined residually by the fundamental urgency of an excess: the divine or sacrificial share, sumptuous discharge, economic profit.” See “The Ideological Genesis of Needs,” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 72. Jeremy Bentham questions the precision with which the concept of basic needs or necessities can be employed: “Is it possible to draw a line of distinction between what is necessary and what is superfluous? I do not think so. Necessary is a

authentically her own. Thus, the subject requires a mediator from whom she may borrow desires.¹² According to Girard's theory, desire must be learned.¹³ Desires are mimetic, because there are no objective criteria, and so the subject does not know what to desire.¹⁴ Because other species lack the human capacity for mimesis, humans alone possess what Girard is calling desire.¹⁵ Girard proposes to limit uses of the word "desire" to cases in which "the misunderstood mechanism of mimetic rivalry has imbued what was previously just an appetite or a need with this metaphysical dimension."¹⁶ Though mimetic desire often has terrible consequences, it is basically good, for without it, humanity could not exist.¹⁷ Girard says that this desire "is rooted neither in the subject nor in the object, but in a third party whose desire is imitated by the subject."¹⁸

Girard claims Shakespeare as a proponent of his theory of learned desire.

Shakespeare has this desire in mind when he writes about "suggested desire," "jealous desire," "emulous desire," or any of the terms used to describe the phenomenon of envy.

relative term, and it refers to human needs." See *The True Alarm*, reprinted in W. Stark, ed., *Jeremy Bentham's Economic Writings*, vol. 3 (London: George Allen, 1954), 85.

¹² René Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 15.

¹³ Similarly, Mel Zelenak argues: "Because consumers are not born with an intuitive sense that enables them to choose the things that are good for them, they have to learn from others." He suggests, as does Girard, that people may, therefore be influenced either by those who have the well-being of others in mind or by those whose goal is personal gain. See *Consumer Economics: The Consumer in Our Society* (Scottsdale: Holcomb Hathaway, 2002), 58. For Girard, the former category seems relatively small, and this thesis will suggest that even well-meaning models pose serious risks to their mimetic disciples. John Kenneth Galbraith believes that the individual's dependence on a mediator is the product, not of human nature, but of changes in the economy—in particular, the growth of advertising and salesmanship. He claims: "Few people at the beginning of the nineteenth century needed an adman to tell them what they wanted." See *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 2. This thesis sides with Girard in this disagreement, but agrees that advertising and consumerism have made the dependence on mediators more problematic, not however by making the dependence greater, but by changing the mediators and by paradoxically glorifying both the mediators and the ideal of absolute independence from all mediators.

¹⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 371, 343.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 296.

¹⁷ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 15.

¹⁸ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 170.

Shakespeare also calls this mimetic desire “love that stood upon the choice of friends,” “love by another’s eye,” and “love by hearsay.” The phrase “Do you love him because I do!” from *As You Like It* also expresses mimetic desire.¹⁹ In the frequent shifts of lovers in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, each lover is choosing love by another’s eye. Each lover changes objects because another already loves or appears to love the new object. Neither boy is ever in love with any one girl for long, but both boys are always in love with the same girl. The mimetic desirer abdicates freedom of choice, but retains the choice of models. This is what is meant by “love by another’s eye.”²⁰ Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece* differs from the source material in that Tarquin decides to rape a woman he has not even met. His decision is based merely upon her husband’s praise of her beauty. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Valentine plays a crucial role in Proteus’s sudden passion for Silvia. Clearly, this is mimetic desire with Valentine playing the role of model. Proteus’ desire is sparked, not by his brief encounter with Silvia, but rather by his predisposition toward objects that Valentine desires.²¹

Girard first came to develop his theory of triangular desire by finding it in the works of great writers.²² Proust reveals new forms of alienation not the products of needs or concrete differences. Proust’s metaphors draw the reader’s attention from the object to the mediator and from linear to triangular desire.²³ Rooted not in the subject or the object, mimetic desire is rooted in the model, whose desire the subject imitates in hopes

¹⁹ René Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 4-5, 82, 95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 73, 32, 74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4, 8-9.

²² Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 3; *To Double Business Bound*, 89.

²³ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 222-25.

of resembling the model, indeed, of becoming fused with the model.²⁴ “At the stage illustrated by Dostoevsky, the object and the model are both necessary, but they only have value in terms of their mutual relationship. In fact, it is neither the woman nor the rival that the subject desires, but the couple as such.”²⁵ This same dynamic unfolds in “The Curious Impertinent” story in *Don Quixote*, as well as in *The Eternal Husband*. In both cases, the hero seems to offer his beloved wife to the mediator, even as one might offer a sacrifice to one’s god. Girard says, “All the ideas of the Western novel are present in germ in *Don Quixote*. And the idea of these ideas, the idea whose central role is constantly being confirmed, the basic idea from which one can rediscover everything is triangular desire.”²⁶ Girard finds the same idea in Stephen Daedalus’ theory concerning Shakespeare in *Ulysses*. Indeed, Eglington criticizes this theory by saying that Stephen is showing them nothing but “a French triangle.” Girard comments: “Our sympathy for [Stephen] should not dismiss Eglington’s bon mot as irrelevant; the critic looks through the wrong end of his telescope, but sees something essential, the triune structure of mimetic desire. He sums up the entire lecture.” Bloom too is interested in these French triangles, and as in “The Curious Impertinent” and *The Eternal Husband*, he invites his prospective rival to his home and encourages Stephen’s desire for Molly.²⁷

Triangular desire is not first thematized in *Don Quixote* or any great novel, however, but in the Judaic and Christian scriptures. Girard contends that the purpose of the tenth commandment is not to speak to some rare, perverse kind of desire, but to desire as such. Individualism imagines wrongly that desire is autonomous, but the tenth

²⁴ René Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky*, trans. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1997), 144.

²⁵ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 360.

²⁶ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 49-52.

²⁷ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 262-63.

commandment recognizes that human beings desire what their neighbors have or what their neighbors desire. Thus, it sums up the mimetic theory of triangular desire: “Since the objects we should not desire and nevertheless do desire always belong to the neighbor, it is clearly the neighbor who renders them desirable What the tenth commandment sketches, without defining it explicitly, is a fundamental revolution in the understanding of desire. We assume that desire is objective or subjective, but in reality it rests on a third party who gives value to the objects.”²⁸ Obviously, advertising and advertising models would not even exist were it not for mimetic desire.²⁹ If desire were subjective, advertising would be unnecessary. People would have innate desires and would act on them. If desire were objective, companies would only need to make the

²⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 8-9. This idea that Girard finds in the tenth commandment is one that nonetheless seemed groundbreaking when Thorstein Veblen described it at the dawn of the 20th century. He believed that emulation is the root motive of all ownership and insisted that the proclivity toward invidious comparison is “of ancient growth and is a pervading trait of human nature.” Indeed, he claimed that except for the “instinct of self-preservation, the propensity for emulation is probably the strongest and most alert and persistent of the economic motives proper.” See *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: Modern Library, 1934), 25-26; 109-110. Juliet Schor shows how controversial this idea remains when she lists several assumptions of the liberal view on markets for consumer goods, which derive from those of standard economic theory. One of these states: “Each consumer’s preferences are independent of other consumers’ preferences.” She explains: “We are self-contained in a social sense. If I want a sport utility vehicle, it is because I like them, not because my neighbor does. The trendiness of a product does not affect my desire to have it, either positively or negatively.” See “Towards a New Politics of Consumption,” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, ed. Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt (New York: The New Press, 2000), 453. James S. Duesenberry warned: “A real understanding of the problem of consumer behavior must begin with a full recognition of the social character of consumption patterns. From the viewpoint of preference theory or marginal utility theory, human desires are desires for specific goods; but nothing is said about how these desires arise or how they are changed. That, however, is the essence of the consumption problem when preferences are interdependent.” See *Income, Saving, and the Theory of Consumer Behavior* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), 19.

²⁹ Arthur Asa Berger suggests that mimetic desire is “a motivating force in our behavior as consumers. It is mimetic desire that helps explain our consumer lust: we desire what others have desired and have purchased, especially those we look up to—such as celebrities, movie stars, and sports heroes.” See *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising’s Impact on American Character and Society* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 30. James B. Twitchell points out that American society should not be labeled “materialistic,” for if material things were the real objects of desire, “there would be no signifying systems like advertising, packaging, fashion, and branding to get in the way. We would gather, use, toss out, or hoard based on some *inner* sense of value.” See *Lead Us into Temptation: The Triumph of American Materialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 11. Instead, consumers depend upon advertisers and models to mediate meaning and value through the products.

public aware of the product, and consumers would purchase the most desirable product. Perhaps, there would be some kind of advertising or “infomercials” but there would be no need for models at all. The professional “model” serves precisely in Girard’s sense of the word—as a mediator for desires. Businesses advertise in hopes of loaning consumers the model’s desire. Advertising and the tenth commandment would seem to be at odds.

Mimetic Rivalry and the Loss of Self

Two of the main problems that Girard associates with mimetic desire may be avoided in a capitalist-consumer society. Girard describes a double bind that is inevitable in his mimetic theory. Even though the model may encourage imitation, the disciple who carries the imitation too far will provoke the model’s wrath. The model may feel betrayed, and the disciple will then feel rejected and humiliated—judged unworthy by the model to participate in the superior existence of the model. Human beings cannot respond to the universal command to imitate without then being told not to imitate. According to Girard this double bind is a common phenomenon and indeed is the basis of all human relationships.³⁰ According to Girard, only Christ is a safe model, because he

³⁰ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 146-47. Daniel Harris comments on a related development in the appearance of the advertising model. Her orgasmic face emphasizes that she lives far more intensely and enjoys life more than the reader. Harris observes that she “engages in a sexual demonstrativeness meant to exclude us from the solipsistic intensity of her pleasure.” He questions the validity of the mimetic function of fashion when the faces of models are of such exceptional beauty and rarity that they cannot be reproduced. “In other words, in the Age of the Face, the new model seems to preclude from the beginning the very act of imitation she invites, an act that common sense tells us would be more easily performed using as a paradigm the facelessness of the anonymous fashion idol, the Hitchcockian prop whose interchangeability lends itself more readily to being impersonated.” According to Girard, however, this double bind is part of the mimetic dynamic, and in the case of advertising, without the preclusion of imitation even in the act of inviting imitation, the model would lose some of her prestige and influence over those who idolize her. Harris also notes another trend in advertising—the carelessness, even slovenliness of models. Here, he claims, the message is that the model is “*above* posing, *above* trying to look good, *above* conforming to social expectations. Her languid stances and disheveled appearance serve an

has no acquisitive desire.³¹ But the kind of model that invites imitation in consumer society is the professional model of advertising, and this model too is in some sense safe. If I imitate the Marlboro man's desire for cigarettes, I have about as little a chance of coming into conflict with him as I do of coming into conflict with Christ by being a Christian. This is so, in part, because the model feigns desire for a product. In other words, with Christ as model, one imitates a real, but nonacquisitive desire, and thereby avoids conflict with the model. With the professional model, on the other hand, one imitates a feigned, acquisitive desire, and thereby avoids conflict with the model. Thus the double bind may well be avoided in consumer society. The command to imitate will never be rescinded or contradicted. I may buy and smoke all the cigarettes my lungs can take in, and the Marlboro man will never reproach me for my efforts.

According to Girard, mimetic desire leads inevitably to conflict and rivalry. This idea may be crystallized in an image. Girard writes, "When any gesture of appropriation is imitated, it simply means that two hands will reach for the same object simultaneously: conflict cannot fail to result."³² This conflict is not coincidental, but inevitable because

explicitly ideological function, that of showing how little glamor matters to her, how she holds in disdain the very thing her admirers most desire: to make certain that they look perfect." See *Cute, Quaint, Hungry and Romantic: The Aesthetics of Consumerism* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 221-27. For Girard, this is the strategy of the coquette, who is attractive, precisely because she acts as if she did not care what others think of her.

³¹ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 430. Some advertisements, as for example, an Australian ad for Room Two Clothing discussed by Warren Berger, actually try to promote rivalry. A waif lies prostrate on a bed, naked but for a skirt, head on folded arms tilted to the side, with one eye facing the camera. The large white print covering the photograph reads: "WHAT THE BITCH WHO'S ABOUT TO STEAL YOUR MAN WEARS." See *Advertising Today* (London: Phaidon, 2001), 405. Nonetheless, a real rivalry with this woman seems unlikely, for despite the ad's claim, the reader's relation to the model remains one of what Girard calls, "external mediation." In external mediation, the distance (spiritual as well as physical) between subject and mediator is too great to create a rivalry. See *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 9. Paisley Livingston points out: "Insofar as external mediation is indeed a form of mimetic desire, it follows that not all mimetic desire 'leads necessarily' to conflict." See *Models of Desire: René Girard and the Psychology of Mimesis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 136. The danger in the relationship to the advertising model, this thesis will argue, is not in any literal rivalry, but in the consequences of what Girard calls "metaphysical desire."

³² Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 201.

the second hand reaches for the object precisely *because* the first hand is reaching for it.³³ Christ could again be seen as a solution to this problem, for rather than reaching for any object, he divides and shares. After his resurrection, he encounters two disciples on the road to Emmaus; they do not recognize him until he blesses and breaks the bread, an image perfect in its contrast to that of the two hands reaching for the same object. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the authenticity of the first hand's reach in consumer society is doubtful, but what is more pertinent here is the fact that in consumer society, though there may be many hands reaching for the same object, there are also many identical objects. In other words, consumer society seems capable of producing a miracle not unlike that of the loaves and the fishes. Of course, it may well be the case that even the most technologically advanced industrial society will never be able, by producing enough goods for everyone, to avoid conflict altogether, but it does seem as if the kind of immediate and inevitable conflict Girard discusses might be avoided in such a society. That is, the poor within and outside a consumer society no doubt suffer for the luxury of others, but the consumer's imitation of a model does not lead inexorably to the model's reproach or to conflict between model and disciple.

In Girard's theory, the model, after becoming a rival, becomes a god. If consumerism can, in fact, avoid the first link in this chain, it might seem to be immune from the second, but there is a way in which this metaphysical desire is still quite pertinent. Proust is aware of the metaphysical significance of desire, and through his metaphors, he reveals this desire and the divinization of the mediator. "Marcel [the narrator] has only to let his 'fixed and agonized' gaze rest on someone and we see the

³³ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 145-46.

abyss of transcendency emanating from the mediator.”³⁴ While the model does not become a rival in consumer society, the model may still become the object of this hunger for the sacred.³⁵ While the consumer may not fight with the model for the desired product, the consumer does perhaps still long for something that the model has and will not relinquish: “The intact narcissism of the other is the indescribable paradise where the beings that we desire appear to live—and it is because of this that we desire them.”³⁶ In this desire for *being*, a sort of divinization occurs, sometimes directed toward the object, sometimes toward the mediator. In contrast to this divinity, one makes of oneself a lowly beast, as does Helena of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in relation to Demetrius, the object she cannot obtain, and to Hermia, the victorious mediator.³⁷ Of course, the other is not

³⁴ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 79-80.

³⁵ Against the view presented in this thesis, Jean-Michel Oughourlian and James Alison, two important Girard scholars seem to suggest that there is nothing inherently dangerous about this metaphysical desire for a human model. Oughourlian describes a scenario in which one becomes a teacher for another’s apprenticeship and a god for that one’s destiny, thereby avoiding “mimetogony” or mimetic conflict. The disciple, on the other hand, “must accept the tutelage and modeling and acknowledge the superiority of the other, especially the anteriority of the latter’s ideas over his own. He must accept the role of disciple and cultivate both reverence and gratitude toward his model, rather than resentment.” See Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Puppet of Desire: The Psychology of Hysteria, Possession, and Hypnosis*, trans. Eugene Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 118. Alison describes a different situation, in which the disciple participates in “a sort of ‘unknowing,’ a nonrecognition of the other’s rôle in my genesis, but which does ‘me’ no harm for as long as the other is taken as a model and not as a rival.” It is only when the other is taken to be a rival that “this ‘unknowing’ becomes a self-deception, something pathogenic.” See *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 32. The problem here is that the advertising model, besides being a poor teacher and an unworthy master of one’s destiny, encourages precisely an attitude the very opposite of the one described by Oughourlian for the ideal student. That is, in order to be a good disciple of these models, one cannot show reverence or gratitude, much less acknowledge the superiority of any other. In both situations described, there remains a danger in accepting the other as model: one can and will judge oneself in the name of the model (or rather in one’s false view of the model).

³⁶ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 375.

³⁷ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 43, 50. This phenomenon has been widely commented upon discussions of consumerism. In his description of narcissistic culture, Christopher Lasch says that for the narcissist there are only two groups—the rich and famous and the common herd. Though the narcissist identifies with the former, this is a defense against the fear of being seen as one of the latter. The narcissist’s admiration is filled with envy and often turns to hatred, especially if the envied one serves as a reminder of the narcissist’s own insignificance. See *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1978), 84-85. Jean Kilbourne notes that this is precisely what advertising does constantly: “Again and again advertising depicts adulthood as a drag, our real lives as monotonous, gray, our relationships as boring and obligatory, our jobs meaningless.” See *Deadly Persuasion: Why Women and Girls Must Fight the Addictive Power of Advertising* (New York, NY: Free

absolute in any real sense, and thus Girard calls this desire, which makes an absolute out of the other, “metaphysical.”³⁸ The desiring subject sees in the model what it lacks in itself. The subject feels itself to be without a self, but sees in the model “a divine autosufficiency.”³⁹ Through imitating this model, the subject sees itself on the verge of attaining this same autonomy, but it is a mirage, an illusion projected by the subject’s idealization of the model.⁴⁰ Though consumer society may manage at times to prevent mimetic models from turning into rivals, it does nothing to prevent this process of divinization. Indeed, Daniel Harris believes this dynamic to be the axis around which the fashion world turns: “[S]ince its inception the whole purpose of the fashion industry has been to compel the reader to imitate the model. The basic assumption of women’s magazines is that we can acquire the power of glamor, its omnipotence and invulnerability, by donning the sacred articles of the mannequin’s clothing and mimicking her hieratic gestures—a fetishism we associate with primitive religions rather

Press, 1999), 225. In other words, advertising sets up the opposition that Lasch finds characteristic of the narcissist and then works to convince the audience that it belongs to the common herd, but could belong to the groups of the admired and envied. Juliet Schor describes this dynamic in terms of income: “If what people want is determined largely by what an affluent group with rising incomes has, large numbers of people will be left with the belief that they have not achieved enough. This yearning, along with the sometimes destructive behaviors associated with it, creates an ongoing tragedy of modern consumer society.” See “What’s Wrong with Consumer Society? Competitive Spending and the ‘New Consumerism,’” in *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Washington: Island Press, 1999), 50. Thus, consumerism leads precisely to the kind of self-condemnation that Girard finds stemming from the metaphysical desire presented in Shakespeare.

³⁸ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 36.

³⁹ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 58. Roland Barthes claims that the woman of fashion is presented as being a more complete person, a person with greater being. In fashion, “the individualization of the person depends on the number of elements in play, and still better, if it is possible, on their apparent opposition (*demure and determined, tender and tough, casual and cunning*): these psychological paradoxes have a nostalgic value: they give evidence of a dream of wholeness according to which the human being would be everything at once, without having to choose.” Thus the woman of fashion dreams of being herself and, at the same time, another. Barthes calls this “the final luxury of a personality rich enough to be multiplied, stable enough never to be lost.” See *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 255-57. Rosalind Coward sees a higher form of existence represented by the model’s defiant, pouting face. The model is attractive without trying to be. “Indeed, the look ultimately says, ‘It’s not because of my invitation that you will want me. You will want me anyway.’” See *Female Desires: How They Are Sought, Bought, and Packaged* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 59. Here again, is the woman Girard calls the coquette, who makes herself desirable through her own lack of desire.

⁴⁰ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 15.

than with a sophisticated secular culture like our own.”⁴¹ The comparison to primitive religion is certainly an apt one. It is, in part, the omnipotence and fetishism described here by Harris that makes consumer desires “metaphysical.”

When the model becomes a rival or a god, the object often becomes irrelevant. Girard refers to “pure rivalry” and to “prestige” to describe this situation,⁴² but again, it seems that even without conflictual rivalry this kind of displacement of the object can take place. Certainly, the woman who comes before Solomon claiming that another woman’s baby is her own is involved in a conflict, but Girard’s description of her might just as well apply to a subject and model not involved in conflict. He says that the child is irrelevant to her, for the only thing that really matters to her is to possess what the other woman possesses.⁴³ Here it seems that the baby functions much like a status symbol. But in cases where more than one copy of the object is available, the subject could be content to have what the model possesses without taking the object from the model. Of course, when the subject is fascinated with the model, the subject wants, not to *have* what the model has, but to *be* what the model is.⁴⁴ Helena wants to *have* Demetrius, but she

⁴¹ Harris, 221-22.

⁴² Girard, *Things Hidden*, 26.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 238-39.

⁴⁴ Paisley Livingston explains this notion in a way that seems to make the connection to the consumer model even more obvious: “[I]n all cases of mimetic desire, the tutelary belief that qualifies someone as a model to be imitated involves . . . the belief that this person is, for various reasons, ‘the kind of person’ that the imitator would like to be. In other words, in any episode of mimetic desire, the imitator has both a real and an ideal conception of self and perceives someone else as corresponding to the ideal in some significant way. In respect to that ideal, the other’s desire is deemed worthy of imitation” (66). Thus, the viewer sees the model as an ideal version of herself; she judges herself, not just in the name of the model-other, but in the name of her ideal self, represented by the model. Thus Molly Haskell writes: “However susceptible women were to the wares on display, I’d suggest that what the female viewer is buying, or buying into, is not just the accoutrements of the ‘good life’ . . . but also another version of herself. That ideal self is not only stylishly clothed and housed but also possessed of higher sentiments and deeper thoughts. For in the peculiar dynamic of identification with film stars, a kind of transubstantiation occurs.” See “Movies and the Selling of Desire,” in *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness*, ed. Roger Rosenblatt (Washington: Island Press, 1999), 129. Likewise, Sergio Zyman and Armin A. Brott argue that consumers are like high school students who want to be “one of the ‘cool’ people.” If they cannot be them, they could at least try to be like them by wearing what they wear, driving what they drive,

wants to *be* Hermia, and as Girard notes, “[b]eing is obviously more important than having.” The object cannot compare in importance to the model upon whom its worth depends.⁴⁵ Still, metaphysical desire can, at times, also transform the object. The struggle with a rival bestows value on the object of the struggle, and in consumerism, even though this struggle may at times be sidestepped, the object may still be transformed by desire. In describing the snob’s desire to enter the Faubourg Saint-Germain, Proust is interested not in the meager non-object or in the object transfigured by desire, but rather in the process of transfiguration, just as Cervantes is interested not in a barber’s basin or

etc. “Of course, there was nothing inherently cool about their clothes, cars, music, or movies themselves. What made those otherwise generic assets attractive was the association between them and the people you wanted to be like. The ‘cool’ qualities of the cool people—in your mind, anyway—rubbed off on the products and services, and it was as if using them would make you cool, too.” See *The End of Advertising as We Know It* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 101. John Berger argues that publicity is not about pleasure-in-itself, but “always about the future buyer. It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be. Yet what makes this self-which-he-might-be enviable? The envy of others. Publicity is about social relations, not objects.” Thus, in effect, the viewer of advertising is “meant to envy herself as she will become if she buys the product. She is meant to imagine herself transformed by the product into an object of envy for others, an envy which will then justify her loving herself.” Advertising seeks to convince the viewer that she is not enviable, but could be. See *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 132-34, 149. The problem is that this image of the ideal self is no more realistic or healthy than the desire to *be* the other one cannot be. Peter Stearns claims that the focus on and praise of envy in advertising began around 1915. He cites a soap ad from that period: “The Envied Girl—Are you one? Or are you still seeking the secret of charm?” See *Consumerism in World History: The Global Transformation of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2001), 53.

⁴⁵ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 42-43. Indeed, as Kilbourne observes, the value of the object is completely dependent upon one’s relations to others: “Owning a Rolex would not impress anyone who didn’t know how expensive it is. A Rolex ad itself says the watch was voted ‘most likely to be coveted.’ Indeed, one of advertising’s purposes is to create an aura for a product, so that other people will be impressed. As one marketer said recently in *Advertising Age*, ‘It’s no fun to spend \$100 on athletic shoes to wear to high school if your friends don’t know how cool your shoes are’ (69) Oughourlian goes further, claiming that the object does not even “exist in itself; it exists only insofar as it is designated by the other’s desire. The object exists only at the point of encounter, where the two desires intersect.” (219) Alissa Quart quotes a pro-anorexia girl named Linda: “[I]f you could just be as thin as these women, then maybe you’d be as happy as they appear and just maybe instead of your guy looking at the billboard with lust they’ll look at you that way.” Quart comments that these pro-anorexia girls are not interested in buying the advertised goods, but instead “buy the idea of the tiny supermodel body clad in underwear and try to become her in the only way they know how.” See *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2003), 137-40.

in Mambrino's helmet, but in Don Quixote's conflation of the two.⁴⁶ It would seem that this kind of transformation is the *raison d'être* of advertising.⁴⁷

The consumer awaits the verdict of another to know what should be desired.⁴⁸ In Proust, the snob is a slave to what is fashionable because he does not trust his own judgment; he desires what the right people desire.⁴⁹ Girard sees this same dynamic

⁴⁶ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 219.

⁴⁷ Thus, Robert Bocoock writes: "People try to become the being they desire to be by consuming the items that they imagine will help to create and sustain their idea of themselves, their image, their identity." See *Consumption, Key Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1993), 68.

⁴⁸ Livingston seems to offer various defenses of the model's disciple. He proposes that the model could be considered the "agent who is thought to know the 'true value' of things" (39). The question here becomes: on what basis does one draw this conclusion? If one does not know the true value of things already, how can one judge who has such knowledge (Livingston is certainly in good company here, as Aristotle's suggestion that to be virtuous, one should find a virtuous person and do as that one does, invites the same kinds of questions). Livingston also explores the possibility that one may choose a model (M) because "M is the kind of person I would like to be, because M is q, has r, know s, and has t, where q, r, s, and t are typical characteristics of a superior social kind" (43). But it would seem there is no reason not to reverse the cause and effect here and say instead that r is the kind of thing I want, because M has it. Indeed, if Girard is correct, this is most certainly the case, rather than the scenario proposed by Livingston. He also draws a distinction between a model whose endorsement leads one to buy a particular brand of toilet article more than once and one who leads another to adopt certain political attitudes and make certain professional decisions. The first, he claims, can hardly be called a mediator. "In both cases there is an imitation of another person, but the differences between these cases may be more important than the similarities" (64). There is certainly a difference in regard to the act being imitated, but what this thesis is concerned with is not the importance or triviality of the imitation, but the psychology behind it. Thus, one might be influenced in major decisions by a person whom one regards as a friend or knowledgeable mentor, and this may result in minor or even healthy psychological effects, while one might be influenced in the most trivial of decisions by a model whom one regards with metaphysical desire and destructive envy. This thesis argues that advertising and consumerism promotes the latter. Arthur Asa Berger points out the prevalence of imitation in consumerism, but also seems to trivialize it: "Young people often identify with heroes and heroines and try to emulate their behavior, their 'style,' or their images—if not in the real world, then in the world of consumption" (13). It is unclear what distinction is being drawn here between the real world and world of consumption. Unfortunately, an independent land called the "real world" would seem to be a thing of the past, for surely, consumption has by now invaded all aspects of life.

⁴⁹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 23-25. As marketers are well-aware, the "right people," means not just models, but certain consumers as well. "*Added values are established by the type of people who use the brand.* Many consumers relate to others who use the brand. This association, often depicted in the advertising, is an added value." See John Philip Jones and Jan S. Slater, *What's in a Name?: Advertising and the Concept of Brands* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), 237. Irma Zandl and Richard Leonard describe a group of consumers they call "Alpha" consumers, who comprise about five percent of the population, but who have an inordinate influence on the desires of the population at large. "Even the implicit endorsement of an Alpha consumer . . . contributes immeasurably to a product's desirability among the mainstream. Indeed, savvy marketers should look upon their Alpha customers as *de facto* press agents for their businesses." See *Targeting the Trendsetting Consumer: How to Market Your Product or Service to Influential Buyers* (Homewood, IL: Business One Irwin, 1992), 12. Ed Keller and Jon Berry have been able to predict trends in society based on patterns they have found studying a group of consumers they call "Influentials." What is popular among the Influentials will soon be more widely popular. See *The Influentials* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 68. On the other hand, John Rae pointed out the opposite

worked out repeatedly in the lives and literature of Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, and Proust. The problem does not lie in the fact that one desires mimetically, for that is simply how humans learn, but that one judges oneself for doing so. One places impossible demands upon oneself, in part because of the false promise of metaphysical autonomy. One comes to see that the promise is false in regards to oneself, but assumes that it is true for all others, and especially for the model.⁵⁰ Thus, one must hide one's shame from the others. The underground man says, "I am alone, and *they* are together."⁵¹ Once one becomes aware of the role imitation plays in one's desire, one must renounce either this desire or one's pride. One strategy, carried out by Julien in *The Red and the Black*, is to renounce (or pretend to have renounced) the object in order to possess it, but Girard finds in more contemporary literature that the popular strategy is to renounce desire itself. Desire makes us into slaves, so pride demands its renunciation. In the final romantic pose, the hero claims to have accomplished without trying and almost without awareness what others accomplish by desire.⁵² Thus, a popular motif in advertising is the rugged individual without models.⁵³ The person who buys this product is the one who

phenomena nearly two centuries ago: "The general consumption of any commodity by the vulgar lessens, on the contrary, in many minds, the pleasure it would otherwise give. It brings down the individual, in this particular, to a level with the lowest." See *Statement of Some New Principles on the Subject of Political Economy, Exposing the Fallacies of the System of Free Trade, and of Some Other Doctrines Maintained in the "Wealth of Nations"* (Boston: Hillard Gray, 1834), 268.

⁵⁰ Guy Debord describes media stars as spectacular representations of people, "distilling the essence of the spectacle's banality into images of possible roles." In fact, the star is the opposite of an individual, and as clearly the enemy of the individual in himself as of the individual in others. In entering the spectacle as a model to be identified with, he renounces all autonomy in order himself to identify with the general law of obedience to the course of things. Stars of consumption, though outwardly representing different personality types, actually show each of these types enjoying an equal access to the whole realm of consumption and deriving exactly the same satisfaction therefrom." See *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 38-39.

⁵¹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 55-57.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 272-75.

⁵³ Warren Berger describes the ironic distance of models, which, he claims, "suggests a certain reluctance on their part to commit to the product." This skepticism and hesitance make the "perfect postmodern pitching machine" (258). This model is, not only without models, but is even unimpressed with the very product her image is being used to hawk. John Berger suggests that to be the enviable one requires that one

marches to her own drummer, the one who rejects what society tells her she is supposed to do, the one who does not succumb to the mob that, like cattle, desires a competing brand. Of course, this is all a game, for one is being cajoled into desiring (or not desiring) *like* the idealized model.

Mimetic desire possesses the subject so that one no longer controls oneself. The subject abandons herself to and is possessed by the mimetic model.⁵⁴ The subject feels invaded by a supernatural creature and cannot respond. Some presence seems to be acting through the subject, as the subject has totally absorbed the desires of another.⁵⁵ It is with this dynamic in mind that Dostoevsky writes *The Demons* and *Brothers Karamazov*, for in those works he explicitly interprets the fascination for models as demonic possession.⁵⁶ If there is any rivalry, it dissolves because the subject is “transformed into a harmless marionette; all opposition is abolished and the contradiction of desire dissolves.”⁵⁷ In consumerism, that rivalry may have never existed, but there is good reason to believe the possession Girard describes is at play. If so, alienation is too weak a word to describe the subject in consumer society, for the possessed person has no self to suffer alienation: “there is only the other, and the other is at home and there to stay.”⁵⁸ Narcissism or coquetry is, in a sense, a form of possession, in that it enables the

not envy or even appear to take notice of the enviers. “Being envied is a solitary form of reassurance. It depends precisely upon not sharing your experience with those who envy you. You are observed with interest but you do not observe with interest—if you do, you will become less enviable. . . . [T]he more impersonal they are, the greater the illusion (for themselves and for others) of their power. . . . It is this which explains the absent, unfocused look of so many glamour images. They look out *over* the looks of envy which sustain them” (133). This is the same strategy that Girard calls coquetry.

⁵⁴ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 144.

⁵⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 165.

⁵⁶ Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 158.

⁵⁷ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 144.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 141-42. Walter Brueggemann maintains that as people have invested more and more of their lives in consumerism, consumerism has become, not only a means of selling products, but also a “demonic spiritual force.” See “The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity,” *The Christian Century*, 24-31

coquette to possess the other with her love for herself. Girard believes that Freud is taken in by narcissism and so fails to describe it properly. Seeing it as generally a feminine desire that does not value objects, Freud does not guess that it might be, not an essence, but a strategy. Thus in knowing that desire attracts desire, the coquette knows more about desire than Freud does. Essentially, the coquette has no more self-sufficiency than the one who desires her, but her strategy's success allows her to keep up the illusion for it provides her with a desire for herself that she can copy.⁵⁹

Insatiable Desire

In metaphysical desire, the acquired object never satisfies, and so the subject must pursue some new object, usually one more difficult to obtain. This description, usually applied by Girard to erotic relationships, also seems the perfect description of

March 1999, 342. Likewise, John F. Kavanaugh argues that because in consumerism, people are what they possess, they are, in turn, possessed by their possessions. People are revealed as commodities and are deprived of their humanity. See *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 37. While in basic agreement with Kavanaugh's assessment, this thesis would see in the products only a token or symbol of the model; the product is at least one step further away from the source of the "possession." Oughourlian warns, however, that all mimetic desire cannot be equated with the demonic. Neither the model nor mimesis can be blamed for rivalry (141). Oughourlian makes a point already made here when he says that "imitation, having begun with a focus on what the model *has*, subsequently turns toward the model's very *being*, since this seems to condition and explain the 'having.'" He then explains: "Possession would be a fully accomplished metamorphosis, an acute case of the compulsion to imitate a model: possession is a crisis of identification of disciple with model, and it forms an integral part of the possessed's *strategy of desire*." He distinguishes hysteria as the denial of the model and of mimetic desire, as the insistence that one's own desire is anterior to that of the model (165). Thus, possession recognizes and acknowledges the interindividual relation and the mimetic nature of desire that hysteria is at pains to deny. The possessed acknowledges a model, while the hysteric revolts against a rival (179). As has already been pointed out here, the non-rivalrous mimetic desire, which Oughourlian associates with possession is, if not a physical danger, nonetheless, a severe spiritual one. James Alison does draw a helpful distinction in this regard when he divides possession into the pacific and the conflictual, or at least it is helpful in so far as the examples he uses are taken as definitive: the former being identified with Jesus, who is "suspected of being possessed because he was apparently moved by another, the Holy Spirit," the latter being identified with "those of us who are 'slaves to sin' and moved by sin against our better judgment, as in Romans 6-7" (158-59).

⁵⁹ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 368-70.

consumerism generally, and of status symbols particularly.⁶⁰ The metaphysical prestige that is sometimes assigned to the beloved is sure to disappear if the lover ever

⁶⁰ Many writers have commented upon this insatiable desire. For John Maynard Keynes the focus is on outdoing others, rather than on trying to keep up with those for whom one feels metaphysical desire: “Now it is true that the needs of human beings may seem to be insatiable. But they fall into two classes—those needs which are absolute in the sense that we feel them whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be, and those which are relative in the sense that we feel them only if their satisfaction lifts us above, makes us feel superior to, our fellows. Needs of the second class, those which satisfy the desire for superiority, may indeed be insatiable; for the higher the general level, the higher still are they.” See *Essays in Persuasion* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1952), 365. Scitovsky focuses on one’s place in a social hierarchy: “Another, no less important part is the desire to rank high in the hierarchy of one’s community. That part of social comfort is again an example of a positional good, whose total availability cannot be increased. The scramble for status is a zero-sum game: for me to gain I must outrank others, on whom my gain in rank inflicts a loss. A rise in people’s incomes almost certainly raises their demand for status, which, frustrated by its fixed supply, creates a feeling of frustration.” See *Human Desire and Economic Satisfaction: Essays on the Frontiers of Economics* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 137-38. Robert E. Lane addresses keeping pace with others: “The hedonic treadmill is thus brought into play when the benefits one must receive to attain a given level of satisfaction rise to keep pace with the perceived benefits of others. A rising tide may lift all boats, but if my satisfactions depend on doing better than others, the rising tide will not bring a surge of joy to my boat.” See *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 305. Schor points to the ever-increasing gap between desires and income: “The result is a growing aspirational gap: with desires persistently outrunning incomes, many consumers find themselves frustrated. One survey of US households found that the level of income needed to fulfill one’s dreams doubled between 1986 and 1994, and is currently more than twice the median household income.” She says that even the rich suffer from this dissatisfaction: “Just over 40 percent of adults earning \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year, and 27 percent of those earning more than \$100,000, agree that ‘I cannot afford to buy everything I really need.’ One third and 19 percent, respectively, agree that ‘I spend nearly all of my money on the basic necessities of life.’” See “Towards a New Politics of Consumption,” 450, 459. All of this was well-understood by Veblen, who argued that increases in general wealth could not lead to satisfaction, as it did not lead to reputability: “If, as is sometimes assumed, the incentive to accumulation were the want of subsistence or of physical comfort, then the aggregate economic wants of a community might conceivably be satisfied at some point in the advance of industrial efficiency; but since the struggle is substantially a race for reputability on the basis of an invidious comparison, no approach to a definitive attainment is possible.” See *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 32. “Veblen concluded that increased consumption is essentially a treadmill phenomenon—one must successively consume (waste) more just to stay in the same status location. In other words, increased consumption does not translate into a general increase in self-perceived subjective well-being.” See Yngve Ramstad, “Veblen’s Propensity for Emulation: Is it Passé?” in *Thorstein Veblen in the Twenty-First Century: A Commemoration of the Theory of the Leisure Class, (1899-1999)*, ed. Doug Brown (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1998), 8. According to David Myers, this is a part of broader psychological phenomenon: “In reality we humans have an enormous capacity to adapt to fame, fortune and affliction. We adapt by recalibrating our ‘adaptation levels,’ the neutral points at which sounds seem neither loud nor soft, lights neither bright nor dim, experiences neither pleasant nor unpleasant.” See “Money & Misery,” in *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 56. Likewise, Robert H. Frank argues: “Once we become accustomed to the bigger TV, the more spacious refrigerator, or the better loudspeakers, their favorable features fade into the background. We are no longer conscious of them.” See *Luxury Fever: Why Money Fails to Satisfy in an Era of Excess* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 179-80. Tim Kasser writes: “It is probably difficult for the average person to imagine becoming accustomed to a yacht, servants, and limousines, but consider how you would feel if you could never take a hot shower again. . . . What has happened is that this material pleasure has become the new baseline, the new current state that we want to improve.” See *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 58. Schor suggests that television has become an important source of comparisons, and

“conquered” the beloved,⁶¹ because the status of the beloved is closely connected to the beloved’s coquetry or narcissism. The haughty self-love and divine self-sufficiency of the beloved is belied by an entanglement with the lowly lover. Marcel sees the “little band” as a group of cruel and utterly independent girls that would surely scorn his presence. Once he is admitted into their circle, their transcendence and self-sufficiency can no longer be maintained.⁶² For Marcel, as well as for Julien and Stavrogin (in *The Demons*), possessing the desired object strips it of all value. The hero might then be expected to realize the absurdity of such desire, but rather than renouncing all desire, he renounces only easy desires. The ambitious person’s soul is not persecuted by blind fate, but is hollowed out by the abyss of nothingness.⁶³ Girard says that a permanent restlessness is inherent to the mimetic principle,⁶⁴ which means first, that possession of the object leads to a loss of desire, as when Dostoyevsky finally felt assured of the love of

as people presented on television are generally wealthier than ordinary people, “they inflate the viewer’s perceptions of what others have, and by extension what is worth acquiring—what one must have in order to avoid being left behind.” See “Towards a New Politics of Consumption,” 449-50. “[T]he more time people spend watching television, the more likely they are to believe that other Americans have tennis courts, private planes, convertibles, car telephones, maids, and swimming pools.” See Schor, “What’s Wrong with Consumer Society?” 44. Betsy Taylor likewise writes: “In a culture that reveres Bill Gates, the rising stock market, and status goods, people are no longer comparing themselves with the textbook Joneses, but rather with the wealthy celebrities they see on television. For many, this never-ending expansion of wants leads to conspicuous consumption, psychological stress, and a preoccupation with meeting nonmaterial needs materially.” See “The Personal Level,” in *Do Americans Shop Too Much?*, ed. Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 57-58. Marsha L. Richins explains that first-hand, immediate information about lifestyles and consumption is limited to one’s acquaintances, and “people tend to know others who are similar to themselves.” Thus, “these first-hand sources of information tend to be appropriate and realistic. However, this is not necessarily the case for media images.” See “Social Comparison, Advertising, and Consumer Discontent,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 38 (February 1995): 599. “Our desires are growing principally because we have been comparing ourselves with wealthier people, not only with the Joneses down the block, but also with the Joneses in 90210 (who have benefited handsomely from two decades of growing income inequality).” See Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, preface to *Do Americans Shop Too Much?*, ed. Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), xv.

⁶¹ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 117.

⁶² Girard, *Things Hidden*, 389.

⁶³ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 164-66.

⁶⁴ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 35.

his wife-to-be,⁶⁵ and secondly, that a challenge to possession may lead to a rekindling of desire, as when Troilus becomes aware that he could lose Cressida to the Greeks.⁶⁶

When desire is not rekindled in this way, the subject is disappointed, for the possession of the object fails to transform the subject. The subject will then do one of two things: choose a new object or choose a new mediator.⁶⁷ In choosing models and objects in the future, a new guiding principle is in place: “Every pleasant and willing object is spurned, and every desire that spurns our own desire is passionately embraced; only disdain, hostility, and rejection appear desirable. Mimetic desire efficiently programs its victims for maximum frustration.”⁶⁸ Desire moves beyond the pleasure principle in order to preserve itself as desire.⁶⁹ Labeling this strategy masochism is merely a way for those doing the labeling to avoid facing the contradiction in desire that the “masochist” has revealed.⁷⁰

If the goal of acquiring things is tied to creating status rather than to any inherent value in the object itself, it is obvious that these things will yield happiness only if they

⁶⁵ Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 42.

⁶⁶ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 130. Albert O. Hirschman discusses this loss and rekindling of desire in terms of consumer goods: “As long as it is in working order, such a good [that assures comfort or keeps discomfort at bay] will satisfy a need once and for all, so that pleasure is experienced only once, when the good is first acquired and put to use (‘turned on’). Thereafter, comfort is assured, but the pleasure that comes with traveling from discomfort to comfort is no longer available. There is a good expression for this state of affairs: we say that the particular good has come to be taken for granted. . . . To achieve an appropriately appreciative state of mind we can either work on our imagination—try to get back, each time we use the good (or each time we remember it is in use) into the same state of mind as when we first acquired it—or, less commendably, we can work up feelings of relative superiority and think of the poor fellows who haven’t got it quite yet.” See *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 32.

⁶⁷ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 89-91. Thomas Frank claims that despite their self-professed antimaterialism and suspicion of consumerism, young people today have a “heightened appetite for the new. Unlike their parents, the hip new youth are far more receptive to obsolescence; buying goods for the moment, discarding them quickly, and moving on to the next.” See *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 122.

⁶⁸ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 47.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁷⁰ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 182-83.

do in fact provide the desired status, something they cannot do. In the master/slave dialectic, the master has a problem: he desires the recognition that the slave offers him, but in order for recognition to count, it needs to come from someone to whom he gives recognition. A similar dilemma faces the buyer of status symbols. As one's income rises, one is capable of buying more of the luxury goods one has desired. This increased status, however, places one among new peers who also have these status symbols.⁷¹ Those who might be impressed by them are now beneath one, and their jealousy is of little worth if recognized at all. For example, a person living in an affluent neighborhood may very well fail to feel that her \$30,000 automobile is an object of jealousy when everyone in her neighborhood has an automobile of at least that price. She is very far indeed from recognizing that her house's plumbing and electricity could be objects of jealousy for billions of people. She, therefore, no longer knows to value them as status symbols. She needs to inspire jealousy in her equals, but to the degree that she is successful, they are no longer her equals, and she must arouse the jealousy of a new group. This spiral is endless, and thus status symbols would seem to be inherently unsatisfying. Any satisfaction that a new promotion or a new purchase may provide, therefore, is always fleeting. The enjoyment is probably greatest, in fact, in the anticipation when one can imagine the satisfaction without also having the rising expectations that will swallow that satisfaction. The dissatisfaction that follows is not simply the result of jealousy toward peers, but rather the result and goal of marketing.⁷²

⁷¹ Mel Zelenak explains that the "essence of emulation is the tendency of people in each socioeconomic class to choose as their goal the plan of living established by the next higher income group" (301).

⁷² Thorstein Veblen suggests that this jealousy and dissatisfaction are products of human nature and the institution of private property. Thus, one will always be jealous of one who possesses more. "With private property, under modern conditions, this jealousy and unrest are unavoidable." See *Veblen on Marx, Race, Science and Economics*, (New York: Capricorn Books, 1969), 397.

Disappointed by the lack of transformation that results in acquiring the desired object, the subject comes to desire objects that cannot be so easily obtained. Girard writes: “By definition, metaphysical desire is never aimed at an accessible object.” While most everyone in Proust’s novel longs to enter the Faubourg, for Charlus, it holds no fascination whatsoever, because he was born into it.⁷³ A simple rule of this strange economy follows: “The value of an object grows in proportion to the resistance met with in acquiring it.”⁷⁴ From this it follows that the most valuable and desirable object of all is the one that is completely unattainable. Experience may teach that all objects possessed are ultimately unsatisfactory, but it has nothing to say about unattainable objects.⁷⁵ Desire thus decides that the unattainable object is the best and thus that the invincible model is the best guide.⁷⁶ The consumer model does not come into conflict with the consumer, but that is in part because this guide is so far above the consumer. Indeed, such a model exists on an entirely different plane, a different reality—that of mass media.⁷⁷ In Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*, Achilles seems to exist on a different

⁷³ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 209-10.

⁷⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 295.

⁷⁵ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 118.

⁷⁶ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 327. Jean Kilbourne says that women who are powerful in advertising “are elusive and distant; ‘She is the first woman who refused to take your phone calls,’ says one ad. As if it were a good thing to be rude and inconsiderate. Why should any of us, male or female, be interested in someone who won’t take our phone calls, who either cares so little for us or is so manipulative?” (148). The answer should by now be obvious, even if unsatisfactory: the invincible model or object is the only one that has never disappointed the subject’s unrealistic expectations. Mark Crispin Miller describes this invincibility: “We are meant to look back at that impassive face with a longing that s/he has long since transcended, now that s/he has found a place in the refrigerated heaven of commodities. Beyond desire, and with a perfect body, s/he must view us hungering viewers with irony, seeing how ludicrous it is to be mortal and a person, and therefore having something left to lose.” See *Boxed In: The Culture of TV* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 15-16.

⁷⁷ Jeremy Iggers comments upon the difference between everyday people and the people who populate the world of advertising. The latter live happier and more exciting lives than the former. They may face problems, but they are all quickly resolved. An aura surrounds these people, and they live more intensely. Indeed, they “are gods. We want to be like them. And they want us to be like them, or at least to flatter ourselves that we could be. And the way we can be like them is to buy the products that they consume. Consumption is the bridge between our world and theirs.” Iggers concludes: “To be somebody is to be acknowledged in the image world.” The product is, like the communion wafer, the “bridge between the

plane, but Ulysses understands that his success is not the result of any essential difference in Achilles. His pride is the result of adulation, not vice versa. When the admiration of his fellow soldiers is removed, he falls. Girard says that “in the hypermimetic world that Shakespeare is describing, or in our own media-crazy world, the value of human beings is measured primarily by something we call their ‘visibility.’”⁷⁸ Television and print models possess visibility in a most powerful way, and their visibility is their power.

Because the subject chooses an invincible model, the subject’s own self-worth is diminished. In both Proust and Dostoyevsky, the subject chooses mediators that reject the subject. In Proust, the snob is almost always superior to the model, but nonetheless longs for acceptance by the model and feels inferior to the model.⁷⁹ Both Swann and Marcel are drawn to those who cannot appreciate their superiority. Marcel is attracted to Albertine because he thinks her insensitive and brutal. The less accessible, the more fascinating the other becomes, and the despiritualized, instinctive automaton is totally inaccessible. The divine becomes the inanimate, thereby radically denying one’s own existence.⁸⁰ Perhaps, no model is less accessible and more despiritualized than the model of advertising, and the callous disregard of the “little band” that fascinated Marcel until he saw that it was an illusion of his own making is likely never to be belied in the case of the professional consumer model. The underground man thinks he is quite superior to the

temporal and spiritual worlds.” See *The Garden of Eating: Food, Sex, and the Hunger for Meaning* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 75-76). Stuart Ewen observes that while celebrities appear far above ordinary people, they are also often quite like others, thereby making identification easier. They too “were once unknown. In a society where conditions of anonymity fertilize the desire ‘to be somebody,’ the *dream of identity*, the *dream of wholeness*, is intimately woven together with the desire to be known; to be visible; to be documented, for all to see.” See *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 94. Here, Ewen is quite right to equate visibility with identity in consumer culture.

⁷⁸ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 143-455.

⁷⁹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 68-70.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 282-87.

group of young men and does not desire to be with them, but the feeling of being excluded from their celebration stirs in him a desperate need to be invited. The contempt he imagines them to feel for him gives them great importance.⁸¹ Obviously, much advertising plays on just this sense of exclusion and this desire to belong. According to Girard, people “make their own destinies and become less capable of breaking away from the mimetic obstacle the more they allow themselves to be fascinated by it.”⁸² One may think here of the cruel judgements anorexics hear their models pronounce, for these deities seem never to be satisfied with their loyal subjects’ imitation.

Girard, Consumerism, and the Democratization of Desire

Girard devotes little attention to consumerism, but he does point out the role of mimetic desire in materialism and capitalism. He argues that the drive for more and more possessions is not materialistic, but rather the “triumph of the mediator, the god with the human face.”⁸³ Capitalism makes use of mimetic phenomena, giving them free rein and directing them into economic channels.⁸⁴ It demands a kind of mimetic free play that would be impossible in many societies.⁸⁵ Here, Girard is aware that capitalism and modern society avoid some of the conflicts he associates with mimetic desire and rivalry. The positive consequence of this adaptation is to be found in amazing technological advances. The negative consequence is the “democratization” of neuroses, which Girard links to “the reinforcement of mimetic competition and the ‘metaphysical’ aspect of the

⁸¹ Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 53-54.

⁸² Girard, *Things Hidden*, 189.

⁸³ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 61.

⁸⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 295.

⁸⁵ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 115.

related tensions.”⁸⁶ Girard points out that values in the free market do not fluctuate strictly according to the law of supply and demand, but rather, according to investors’ evaluations of what the net of all evaluations will be. These investors are less interested in the objective facts than in the forces of public opinion.⁸⁷ In a world ruled by mimetic rivalry, fashion is a tyrant, and as this rivalry proliferates and the pace of fashion accelerates, the tyrants and idols rise and fall more and more rapidly. History can then grow “so hot that it loses all significance.”⁸⁸ Girard argues that societies are ruined, not by external enemies, but by the limitless internal ambitions and competitions.⁸⁹

Girard does acknowledge the way in which mass production may avoid mimetic rivalry. He focuses particularly on the multiplication of images: “Being thoroughly unsubstantial to start with, images and signs cannot disappoint to the extent that real objects do, when they seem responsible for the mimetic entanglements in which human beings get caught. Images and signs thus acquire a paradoxical superiority over the objects for which they stand. The object most enjoyable in itself, feminine beauty, is so adversely affected by the mimetic crisscrossing of desires that, to acute cases of mimetic desire, it seems intrinsically frustrating and diabolical. Thanks to images, objects thus interdicted can be enjoyed indirectly, vicariously, sacrificially.”⁹⁰ While a woman who

⁸⁶ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 307.

⁸⁷ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 102. André Orléan points out that because price is an indicator of quality, an object becomes more desirable when its price rises, thus, perhaps, increasing the demand for this product. Here, one of the most fundamental laws of economics is contradicted. See “Money and Mimetic Speculation,” in *Violence and Truth: On the Work of René Girard*, ed. Paul Dumouchel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 110. He also writes of the effects of mimesis on fluctuations in stock prices: “Far from being the aberration that traditional approaches deem it to be, imitation is one of the most important types of rationality in situations of uncertainty and in situations where the agents’ outcomes are highly interdependent. Our central hypothesis amounts to considering that the emergence of speculative bubbles on various kinds of markets can be explained in terms of mimetic dynamics.” See “Mimetic Contagion and Speculative Bubbles,” *Theory and Decision* 27 (1989), 90-91.

⁸⁸ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 148.

⁸⁹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 53.

⁹⁰ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 330.

inspires the love of just two men may well provoke heartache or even suicide or murder, the image of a woman, even if it were to elicit the desires of a million men, may result in no violence, for that image can be endlessly replicated. Girard claims that the contemporary neo-paganism equates happiness with the unlimited satisfaction of desires, and thus demands the suppression of all prohibitions. He admits that this idea has “a semblance of credibility in the limited domain of consumer goods, whose prodigious multiplication, thanks to technological progress, weakens certain mimetic rivalries.”⁹¹ The multiplication of consumer goods may eliminate the source of violent rivalry, but it only exacerbates the loss of self-worth and identity present in all forms of metaphysical desire.

Advertising, a central theme of this paper, plays only a modest role in Girard’s writing. This topic moves to the fore only when Girard analyzes the character of Pandarus in *Troilus and Cressida*: “When business tries to increase the sale of a product, it resorts to advertising. In order to inflame our desire, advertisers try to convince us that the beautiful people all over the world are already in love with their product. If the industry needs a patron saint, it should select Pandarus. Shakespeare is a prophet of modern advertising. His Pandarus dangles in front of his prospective customers the prestigious desire that will arouse their own.”⁹² Advertising plays upon mimetic desire by suggesting a model and fabricating a desire. The best advertising tries to convince the consumer, not that the product is the best, but that it is the most desired.⁹³ Girard describes a kind of “sexiness by proxy” that he claims is not new with the advent of television, but which, on the contrary, dates back to “primitive religion and has never

⁹¹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 181.

⁹² Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 123.

⁹³ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 104.

gone out of fashion.” He acknowledges that it is more important than ever today because technology so accelerates mimetic effects. Technology repeats these effects, extends them, and legitimizes them under the banner of the advertising industry. Pandarus does not wait for customers to appear; he creates customers through advertising. He revives desires that are weak and provides new ones. He places before Cressida the image of Helen’s desire for Troilus, for there is no greater model than Helen. Even if Cressida is not convinced of this desire, that image, nonetheless, provides the “indispensable third party, a model for her desire. Cressida experiences all this as the perpetual miracle of spontaneously falling in love with Troilus.”⁹⁴ Likewise, consumers “know better” than to believe in the desires of the models on television, but that knowledge does not prevent them from imitating these imaginary desires and then crediting those desires to themselves.

This world of endless and illusory desires is made possible by a political structure that upholds it. Democracy creates greater freedom and equality but thereby exacerbates mimetic contagion.⁹⁵ All might have been fascinated by Louis XIV and desired to imitate him, but the Sun King could never be a rival. The nobility could thus enjoy this mediation like children protected by their parents. The revolutionaries thought they

⁹⁴ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 123, 152, 125.

⁹⁵ Paul M. Mazur suggests that while human beings are inherently imitative, the “absence in the United States of a caste system and the considerable freedom of opportunity which prevailed gave a freer play to such emulation than has ever been known elsewhere in historic times.” See *American Prosperity: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: The Viking Press, 1928), 46-47. Paisley Livingston says that the “world of internal mediation is a sociocultural context in which a profound crisis has disrupted the kinds of imaginary social differences and barriers that constitute the apparent stability of a Sancho’s relation to a Don Quixote.” The distinctions that made many relations in the past external mediation are no longer extant. Now, equality is the highest ideal, and yet personal distinction has become a perpetual quest (72). William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally write: “Traditional cultures established quite firm guidelines for intersubjective comparisons, presenting a limited set of role and behavioural models to guide tastes. The consumer society abolishes all such limits and creates an ‘open set’ of intersubjective comparisons; advertising is one of the most important vehicles for presenting, suggesting, and reflecting an unending series of possible comparative judgments.” See *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, Products, & Images of Well Being* (Scarborough, Ontario: Nelson Canada, 1990), 295-96.

would destroy vanity, but instead, with no king to imitate, all must imitate each other, and thus all become gods for each other. The modern crowd's god is envy, and its greed is no longer held in check by the king. The vanity under the king was frivolous, but in the 19th century, it is sad and suspicious with a terrible fear of ridicule.⁹⁶ The loss of traditional hierarchies makes the relation to the metaphysical rival all the more obsessive.⁹⁷ As barriers are lowered, mimetic antagonisms multiply.⁹⁸ The actors exchange threats and then roles. Through democratization, there are chances of success for each person, but everyone wants the most conspicuous position, and not all can have that. The number called increases, but the number of the elect does not.⁹⁹ Even where violence or rivalry is not the result, there is a multiplication and a democratization of desires. One does not just learn to desire by watching one's friends or family members; one watches advertisements, and the poor are infected with the same desires as the rich.

Even when consumers want to be different, they thereby want the same thing. Girard says that when rivals want to become different, they end up becoming more and more alike.¹⁰⁰ The goal of leaving behind the "beaten paths forces everyone inevitably into the same ditch."¹⁰¹ The underground man is most like the others when he thinks he is most cut off from them.¹⁰² All underground individuals think that they are most unique precisely when they are more alike.¹⁰³ Thus, they *all* say together with Dostoevsky's

⁹⁶ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 117-21.

⁹⁷ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 80.

⁹⁸ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 423-24.

⁹⁹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 133-36.

¹⁰⁰ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 22.

¹⁰¹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 100.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁰³ James Alison writes: "[T]he an-ecclesial hypostasis produces universal sameness disguised as particular difference. By insisting on what makes one different (grasping identity, holding on to a particular foundation), one is constantly reducing oneself to the same as others who are doing the same. The more one thinks oneself different, the more the same one becomes" (180).

character, “I’m all by myself and *they* are everyone.”¹⁰⁴ The resulting unanimity can become a kind of god. Though Nietzsche opposes the herd mentality, he endorses the Dionysian spirit, which is, in fact, little more than mob brutality and stupidity.¹⁰⁵ The individual is, as it were, possessed, not by the god, but by the crowd taken to be the god. Likewise, though he struggles against the verdict of the crowd, Job finds it hard to separate the unanimous voice of the community from the voice of God.¹⁰⁶ Girard also compares Stephen Daedalus’ “possession” by Eglington and his colleagues to that of the Gerasene madman by the demon named Legion, as Stephen joins the mimetic unanimity of the others even against himself.¹⁰⁷ But of all the examples of mimetic contagion, Peter, according to Girard, is the most spectacular. He sincerely and profoundly loves Jesus, but when in the midst of a crowd that is hostile to Jesus, Peter cannot help but imitate its hostility. He becomes a mere puppet of mimetic desire.¹⁰⁸ Unanimity generally occludes the truth and is nothing but a mimetic and tyrannical phenomenon.¹⁰⁹ It is the crowd mentality that motivates the herd of pigs to throw itself off the cliff in the story of the Gerasene madman. All the pigs follow the extraordinary action.¹¹⁰ Girard compares this conduct to fashions in modern society. If one pig stumbles accidentally, it may start a new fashion of plunging into the abyss that all would follow. All are drawn

¹⁰⁴ Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 58.

¹⁰⁵ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 173.

¹⁰⁶ René Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 131.

¹⁰⁷ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 262-63.

¹⁰⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 19.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹¹⁰ Jean-Michel Oughourlian identifies the mimetic crowd as a new self into which all the individual selves are absorbed: “A collective self of a collective desire—to speak of this is to speak of a desire that is purely mimetic, contagious, irresistibly attractive, violent, and unstable. A new reality is born, a new self: the mass or crowd, this gigantic protoplasm, this monstrous polynuclear cell, each nucleus of which, having lost the membrane that surrounded it and gave it a semblance of individuality, is immersed in the mimetic torrent that pulls it along with all the rest” (228).

to the fabulous gesture that cannot be undone, and thus they rush after the daring innovator that first fell off the cliff.¹¹¹

Though everyone's desire is mimetic,¹¹² Girard indicates that there is freedom in the choice of models. Yet, in consumer society, people may not even know who their models are. They borrow their desires from advertising.¹¹³ In other words, a corporation is feigning desire in its own product, and the consumer is "buying" the act, "buying" the desire, and buying the product. It might seem a limitation on personal freedom to think that desire is borrowed from one's father or friend, but how much more so if the desire is borrowed from strangers¹¹⁴ who, in fact, never possessed the borrowed desire in the first place. If one is blind to one's choice of models, one has abdicated one's freedom. One's desire is not so much borrowed, as it is loaned anonymously. One does not imitate; one is possessed. The myriad of consumer choices convinces the buyer that she has great personal freedom, but she fails to realize that her desire to purchase an item is not her own, is in fact no one's, but is rather a fabrication loaned from the product's producers. These desires are held in common because all are subject to the same mimesis (if there is any differentiation, it is along broad categories of advertising demographics, like white

¹¹¹ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 183.

¹¹² Though from the universality of mimetic desire, it does not follow that everyone is "possessed," the notion of widespread possession is not new to Christian theology, as Walter Wink observes: "The early church had already to some degree anticipated our situation. It regarded *everyone* prior to baptism as possessed by virtue of nothing more than belonging to a world in rebellion against God." He continues: "Today even the inoculation of baptism has not prevented our being sucked up into mass possession." See *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 51.

¹¹³ After observing that children learn through imitation, Carol Moog cites experiments conducted by research psychologist Albert Bandura that "showed that kids imitated the behavior of others who were shown to them on videotapes just as much as if they were 'real.'" See "*Are They Selling Her Lips?*": *Advertising and Identity* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), 48.

¹¹⁴ Michael Schudson states this obvious objection to advertising: "Although advertising is but one factor among many, there are serious objections to it that do not apply to some of the other forces in the formation of need and desire. Advertising comes from *outside* the community whereas parents and often (though not always) teachers are a part of a person's community." See *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 241.

males, age 18-35). Consumers desire the product because they see models wearing, using, or eating the product. They want to be like the models. The object becomes all the more desirable, because so many people want it. That is, at first people may want the product only because of the models, but soon they want it because everyone wants it. This is mimesis on a grand scale. It may even help to provide the owner of such a product with some satisfaction, though short-lived. Within the consumer society especially, there is a great illusion of freedom. Freedom of choice between countless identical products and the openness of the marketplace give consumers a feeling of freedom, even as they are manipulated by the producers and advertisers of the products they purchase. Each purchase provides the feeling of power and freedom while in fact taking power and freedom from them.

Intermezzo

So far, this thesis has suggested that the principle of mimetic desire is the very basis of consumerism, in particular, of advertising and status symbols. While in Girard's analysis, mimetic desire leads to rivalry and violence, this link is broken in consumer society, both by mass production and by the quarantining of celebrities and models from the general population in the world of the media. These models do not become violent rivals because they are external, not internal mediators. The products do not become objects of violent dispute between model and disciple, because the model does not have the exclusive right to the product, for this would obviously be antithetical to the very goal of advertising. However, the model may still become the object of metaphysical desire,

and this in turn, leads to self-condemnation. Advertising constantly places before consumers faces, bodies, and lives with which they are meant to compare themselves. The comparison should be and is unfavorable. Compared to the media gods, the consumers are lowly, needy, beasts, who hope against hope that by sharing the product advertised with the model, they will also share some of the model's being and divinity. Of course, this hope is continually dashed by each product, but the pursuit is endless. The freedoms upon which this country never tires of congratulating itself serve, in fact, primarily to open this endless, desperate chase to everyone. Now, all share the same dreams and the same dissatisfactions. The individual is part of a mass being known as the crowd.

Now, the thesis will turn to Girard's analysis of novelistic and Christian conversions and suggest how these conversions may be seen as salvific alternatives to consumerism. The great novelists realize that those for whom they had felt metaphysical desire are really no different from themselves. While this is an elevating move, it is at first quite difficult and humbling, for one must admit that one's desires have not been one's own. Consumers must give up the desires manufactured for them, must renounce efforts to outdo their peers, and at the same time, must stop judging themselves in the names of advertising models. People cannot choose whether to desire mimetically or not, but they can choose their models, and real freedom consists in choosing a divine over a human model. Christianity does not seek to do away with desire in general or even mimetic, triangular desire. Desire is not bad, but the way of desiring that is proper to human beings is lost in consumerism (though not exclusively in consumerism) and must be recreated. Christianity acknowledges the human being as a desiring being and even as

a being that learns to desire by imitating the desires of others. It does not seek to overturn this way of desiring, but places Jesus Christ in the role of model of desire instead of a friend, peer, or professional advertising model. Thus there is still a mimetic triangle operative, but inadequate models are replaced by Christ, and the object of desire shifts from consumer goods to God and the well-being of the neighbor. People must choose a divine model and relate to others in love, rather than in competition or imitation.

Conversion: Recognizing the Model

Consumer society is one of constant and dizzying but meaningless change. Like weather vanes, Proust's characters turn in the winds of their desires, but are not thereby converted; they change according to data about the mediator or perhaps to a change in mediator, but their ways of desiring remain constant. Real change would entail no longer shifting with desires.¹¹⁵ Proust's own conversion makes possible the writing of his masterpiece. He sees what the character Marcel could not see when looking at the "little band": the self-sufficiency with which the character endows the members of the group is not real; these girls are like he is. This imagined divine autonomy and self-love has no reality in itself, and so in order to represent desire, he must be on the outside looking in,¹¹⁶ for once inside the desired sphere, its illusion is exposed. There is no difference between his secret and that of the others. Proust knew that by describing his youth, he would also be describing all youths. The novelist can only write if he first sees his mediator as a person like himself. Dostoyevsky stops seeing himself as superhuman or as

¹¹⁵ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 238.

¹¹⁶ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 388, 398.

subhuman. Flaubert, after first conceiving of Emma as the despicable other, realizes: “Mme Bovary, c’est moi!” Great novels spring from obsessions transcended. The writer’s self-examination merges with the morbid attention paid to the mediator.¹¹⁷ The persecutors are not gods or demons, but people eager to hide their own suffering and humiliation. The ability to go beyond metaphysical desire is the fruit of interior struggle, and the novels bear the traces of that struggle.¹¹⁸

What Girard calls a novelistic conversion consists in recognizing not just the model’s similarity to oneself, but also the role the model has played up until the point of conversion. This understanding is not always salvific, however. In many of Shakespeare’s later works, the greater awareness of the heroes only aggravates their condition.¹¹⁹ One must overcome the pride that makes this revelation so painful.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 298-300.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 188-91.

¹¹⁹ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 85.

¹²⁰ Oughourlian discusses a kind of therapeutic possession that allows the possessed person to overcome this pride. He contrasts possession with hysteria: “In possession, the humble recognition of the other as a model produces a cathartic and salutary crisis of identification, a wager that one may someday obtain the object of desire. In hysteria, on the other hand, rebellious pride and denial of the other’s role as a model inhibits identification and leads to the mythic affirmation of the anteriority of the hysteric’s desire over the model’s” (166). He connects possession with identification and hysteria with the inability to identify (180). “In possession, the self of desire becomes *unified* only as it becomes fundamentally altered—as it empties out and completely dissolves and is replaced by the other-self-of-the-other-desire. In hysteria, by contrast, the self of desire *dissociates*, because it does not wish to submit to the other. It therefore alters a part of itself, either physical or psychic, in order to represent and thereby master that otherness. By giving himself over, the possessed gains himself; by letting himself become other, he preserves himself; by yielding himself, he discovers himself; by submitting, he becomes healed” (182). Thus, possession involves a kind of humility in place of the pride of hysteria, for the possessed, as Oughourlian uses the term, are conscious of the model’s influence, while the hysteric is not. Even so, surely the benignity of this possession is at least partly dependent upon the model. Oughourlian has in mind a therapist who is able to “possess” the patient through hypnosis and thereby donate her desires. He claims that hypnosis “reveals mimetic desire to the hypnotic subject” (222-23). Under hypnosis, the therapist can make direct suggestions “because the model functions simply as a model and progressively forms the self; the self is in a learning mode, watching the actions and desires of the model in order to reproduce them, and the model does not set up any resistance to this mimesis, but willingly remains a model. In ordinary life, suggestion can work only indirectly because the subject tends to see the model as a rival and does not want to learn but only to appropriate, and the model himself wants to hold onto his objects and desires; he does not want to be imitated. He does not give himself directly, but must be ‘captured’ indirectly, taken, as it were, by surprise” (234). While hypnosis therapy with a skilled and wise psychologist could be fruitful, it would seem that a kind of metaphysical desire for the model therapist would still be a danger. Also, it is unclear

Proust's narrator describes his disappointment when he sees the acclaimed actress Berma perform. Later, he comes to view the performance more favorably, based upon the opinion of a friend of his father and a newspaper review. If Proust had written the Berma scene while still under the sway of borrowed desire, he would have made the opinion of the others his narrator's own spontaneous opinion. Instead, after the truth of the past is resurrected through conversion, Proust shows the influence of others on Marcel's view, sacrificing his pride to this revelation.¹²¹ Similarly, the consumer's story of herself does not include the influence her models have on her. She claims to have arrived at her desires for certain products all on her own. One believes in the spontaneity of one's own desire. The need for conversion in consumer society is seen in part by the common insistence of individuals that advertising does not influence them. To admit that one is the slave of mimetic desire is humbling, but often salutary. The novelistic world is filled with people possessed by this sickness rooted in pride. When the hero faces the dreaded death of pride, it is a kind of salvation, a conversion that brings new relationships with others and with oneself.¹²²

When the prideful desire to be unique and spontaneous proves impossible to satisfy, the result is disappointment and even self-hatred and despair. Judas and Peter are

how the therapist can be so wise and so knowledgeable of the subject as to form the self of another person successfully and yet not coercively. Even more fundamentally, it seems far from given that the pride of the patient will disappear before this model. Alison seems to agree with the spirit of these objections when he writes: "No holon can appropriate to itself the originality of a desire without becoming locked in a pathological relationship with the other whose desires it imitates. This is a key difference between a human holon and the divine holon we call the Father. The Father is unoriginated love, pure giving. There is no other that is anterior to Him. All desire originates in the Father, all love. Beyond all competition. There is no other source of human or angelic desire than the Father as unoriginated love" (51). In other words, even if the therapist can successfully embody and transfer a new set of desires for the patient, these desires do not originate in the therapist any more than they do in the patient. All desire must be traced back to God, and so an honest and healthy understanding of one's desires must return not to some surrogate divine, but to God Godself.

¹²¹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 37-38.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 307, 294.

guilty of the same pride though it is manifested in opposite ways. Judas takes sole responsibility for Jesus' death and kills himself, whereas Peter says that he will never betray Jesus even if everyone else does.¹²³ The idea of original sin disrupts this pride, setting all human beings on the same footing, suggesting all to be equally guilty of mimetic desire.¹²⁴ This idea can be a very liberating one, for it is pride, not the idea of original sin that makes one believe oneself the guiltiest of all people. The recognition of original sin is a medicine against the pride that desires uniqueness.¹²⁵ This pride is at the heart of consumer society, in which advertising constantly tells individuals that they must be special; when their purchases (that all the others are also making) fail to yield this uniqueness, consumers feel lowly and blame themselves, taking on the guilt associated with the failure. Consumerism teaches that one is either uniquely great or uniquely loathsome, and it fosters desire by persuading consumers that to become uniquely great, they must buy the things the great ones already have. The tenth commandment forbids this envy. It differs from the other commandments because it prohibits a desire rather

¹²³ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 247-48.

¹²⁴ Alison develops this idea, arguing that the demonstration of the possibility of non-rivalrous desire must be "hated and expelled" because it reveals the futility of "trying to found and bring about identity." That this aversion to the truth is "part of original sin is an unalienable part of the Church's teaching. For anyone who understands that there is no natural ability to pass from rivalistic to nonrivalistic desire because of the way rivalistic desire automatically locks itself into itself and interprets all alterity within terms of itself, there will never be the slightest danger of Pelagianism" (193). In describing the fall of Adam and Eve, he writes: "It was *only* when the object was seen as a way of appropriating what was proper to someone else that it became desirable. Hence the temptation was 'to become like God.' The temptation was not resisted: the object was appropriated, but more important than the object, desire thereafter functioned in the mode of appropriation, and relationality with the other became formed rivalistically. The other (whether human or divine) could be perceived only as a threat or rival. The immediate result of the appropriation was that good and evil became defined not according to God, but according to appropriation, which means that the self was not accepted as given, but had to be appropriated by forging itself over against some other considered as evil. The beginning of the forging of an identity 'over against' is the self-expulsion from the paradise of receiving the self gratuitously" (246). Perhaps it is worth noting here that the Manichean God (and in another way, the Hegelian "Being") also forges an identity "over against," while the Christian God who serves as a model for Christians does not. Alison claims that the doctrine of original sin "is to keep alive the beam in my eye. We can go even further: God keeps alive the beam in my eye by making that beam a living Cross, a beam on which there hangs a murdered victim" (261).

¹²⁵ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 325-26.

than an action. This desiring what one's neighbor desires, according to Girard is the original sin, and though it is universally held, it is so at odds with human beings' conceptions of themselves and so humiliating to them, that it is often ignored.¹²⁶ People can admit all kinds of terrible, depraved actions, but admitting that their desires are not their own is more difficult. There can be a form of pride in the former, for one can see power in one's rebellion and sin, but the latter is shameful and humiliating.

The Gospels speak of the mimetic model as *skandalon*. It is never a material object, but a person, a model who works against and becomes a source of fascination for the disciple. This is the opposite of Christian love.¹²⁷ Though the consumer's model does not block the subject's path to the object, this model is, nonetheless, a source of fascination that works against the subject's best interest. Jesus relates scandals to Satan when he rebukes Peter for reacting negatively to Jesus' first prediction of the Passion. "Disappointed by what he takes to be the excessive resignation of Jesus, the disciple tries to breathe into him his own desire, his own worldly ambition. Peter invites Jesus, in short, to take Peter himself as the model of his desire."¹²⁸ This is, of course, just what the professional model invites the consumer to do. Jesus shows the appropriate response—telling the would-be model to get behind him and recognizing the model's temptation as the work of Satan (that is, of mimeticism). Peter wants to possess Jesus, but Jesus rejects this overture and rebukes Peter for it.¹²⁹ Christian consumers must learn to reject the temptations of their would-be models and forcefully to speak out against the tempters who would lend them and others their desires and possess them. The Church cannot

¹²⁶ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 7-9.

¹²⁷ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 416.

¹²⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 33.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

make peace with the tempters, and it should not expect only exceptional Christians to reject them.

Mimetic contagion results in a loss of differentiation. Peter, after the cock crows, and Paul, after he is blinded on the road to Damascus, come to realize that they had been possessed by the will of the crowd.¹³⁰ Girard sees in the possessed man at Gerasa an example of the loss of differentiation. When the citizens of Gerasa find out that Jesus has healed the man, they plead with him to leave the region. Girard claims that, compared to people today, “the people of Gerasa are honest and sympathetic. They do not yet behave like imperious users of the consumer society. They admit that it is difficult for them to live without scapegoats and demons.”¹³¹ According to Girard, the Gospels always subvert talk of demons and Satan. Satan, as he functions in the Gospels, might be said to be mimetic desire incarnate, except for the fact that mimetic desire, by definition, is disincarnate. It eliminates the substance of all that it infects.¹³² The devil has no foundation and no being at all. Thus, he must live as a parasite on others. He is completely mimetic and thus “*nonexistent as an individual self*.” The possessed subjects do not realize their situation, for they are controlled by mimetic contagion, within which there is no real subject. Satan is thus the prince of the world, but he has no real being. Jesus calls the religious leaders sons of the devil. In speaking of the sons of the devil and the sons of God, he is speaking of a desire that is based upon imitation of either the devil or God. Without these models, human desire cannot exist.¹³³ Jean-Michel Oughourlian suggests, and Girard agrees, that the “real human subject can only come out of the rule of

¹³⁰ Ibid., 191.

¹³¹ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 168, 192.

¹³² Ibid., 166.

¹³³ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 42, 69, 40.

the Kingdom; apart from this rule, there is never anything but mimetism and the ‘interindividual.’ Until this happens, the only subject is the mimetic structure.”¹³⁴ God and Satan are the supreme models. Their opposition is one between the model who never becomes an obstacle or rival because of a desire free from greed and competition and the model whose greed has immediate and terrible repercussions for all imitators.¹³⁵ Unlike Girard, this thesis argues that the most immediate and terrible consequences are not rivalry and violence, but metaphysical desire and the inability to form identity free from the manipulations and possessions of others who cannot have one’s independent and beneficent growth as their sole motive.

Conversion: Turning toward a Different Kind of Model

Jesus, of course, imitates the one he calls “Father.” He does what Peter fails to do, and even when all others have fallen away, he refuses to betray the Word of God. He continues to imitate only God, who makes the sun shine upon all without distinction. It is

¹³⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 199. Elsewhere, Oughourlian explains that Descartes’ *cogito* “signifies right from the start that the ‘I’ is a unique and irreducible identity, a claim that . . . is contradicted by the facts” (113). He says: “Since desire is mimetic, there is no truly independent human self; there is never any self except in relation to an other.” While memory serves to inscribe desire and record the formation of the self, it is forgetfulness that makes the present self possible. One forgets other possible selves and “the origin of desire”—that it originates mimetically, that it is born in the other (230-31). “In order for mimetic desire to constitute a self, it must also forget its mimetic origin and affirm itself as autonomous and spontaneous. This very affirmation is what constitutes the self of desire with its individuality” (233). Alison agrees, stating: “The ‘I’ . . . is a holon constituted by desire which is the desire of another holon mimetically transposed. It maintains its existence thanks to two pieces of ‘forgetfulness.’ First, it ‘forgets’ what it owes to the desire which produces and animates it, calling that desire its own. Second, the desire could not produce an autonomous ‘me’ in the holon if it did not ‘forget’ what it owes to the desire of the model holon which it has imitated” (31-32). Erik H. Erikson admits that the traditional psychoanalytic method “cannot quite grasp identity because it has not developed terms to conceptualize the environment.” See *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), 24. Thus, it fails to acknowledge the role of the model’s desire and does not recognize the “interindividual” at all. While subjects often forget the role of the model in order to develop a sense of autonomy, psychoanalysis may be the systematic and disciplined societal aid in this forgetting.

¹³⁵ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 40.

this absolute adherence to the Word that makes Christ the Incarnation of the Word.¹³⁶

James Alison explains this unique quality of Jesus in terms of interindividual psychology and mimetic rivalry:

Jesus is perfectly clear that he is in absolute dependence on the Father: there could be no clearer indication of an interindividual psychology than this. The Other, the Father, is absolutely constitutive of who he is. Yet, because there is no appropriation of identity over against the Other who forms him, the complete dependence on the Other rather than being a limitation or a source of diminishment is exactly what enables the creative flow of life bringing about life to be made manifest and, being made manifest, to be made actual. . . . Jesus' interlocutors are unable to believe because they receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from God. That is to say, because they are locked into the rivalistic mimetic bringing into being of their identities they are unable to have their identities formed by peaceful mimesis of and from God.¹³⁷

Jesus invites his followers to imitate his desire, but he, unlike the romantic or consumer ideal, does not claim to have a desire of his own. He does not insist on his spontaneity or brag that he follows only his own desires. Rather, he desires only to be the image of God and thus devotes himself exclusively to imitating the Father. Thus, he calls his disciples to imitate this imitation.¹³⁸ If they do so, they too will be sons of God.

Alison suggests that the doctrine of the Incarnation is meant, in part, to show “that here is a human we can imitate fully, have our relationality completely transformed in his following, such that we too are able to become sons of the Father in a dependent, but not in a limited way.”¹³⁹ Jesus is both Son of Man and Son of God, because he alone achieves humanity in its perfected form, and this is oneness with God. All that is

¹³⁶ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 206.

¹³⁷ Alison, 198-99.

¹³⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 13. D. Stephen Long makes a similar point, also in terms of desire: “Jesus himself becomes the source of a reasonable object of desire constituting our appetites. Our desire for God issues forth in a movement toward God. This movement is never self-initiated, for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus always give the definitive form to the object of our desire. This movement comes to us as gift, but we can also cooperate with this gift precisely because it is sensibly present within us through our desires. It is a gift we possess but that is never our possession.” See *The Goodness of God: Theology, Church, and the Social Order* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 88.

¹³⁹ Alison, 55.

required is for one to love one's enemies. This non-violence, when manifested in God, may seem irrelevant, but its character changes radically when it is brought into this world and given form in the life of a particular human being, who in turn is presented as a model for human relations.¹⁴⁰ Jesus and his Father are the best models because they do not desire greedily or egoistically.¹⁴¹ Far from the individualistic ideal of today, the Christian is not supposed to "find herself" or become her "true self." She does not, however, refuse these ideals as a result of losing herself in her model (as much Christian theology indicates), but rather because her model refused them first. From her refusal, it cannot be concluded that the Christian must "lose herself," for among all her possessions, there is no evidence that the consumer ever possessed herself in the first place. She is, however, called upon to give up her illusion of such a possession.

Alison points to a similar ambiguity surrounding human freedom. All human desiring and willing is shaped by the other who precedes the will's formation. In other words, "we are constitutionally heteronomous. The insistence on the autonomy of the human will is part of the self-deception of the 'self' that is acting out of denial of the alterity which forms it. The more strongly that alterity, the heteronomous nature of desire, is denied, the more completely we fool ourselves as to our independence in what we want and how we choose. . . . However, ultimately it means that the only real concept of freedom is theological, made possible by the irruption of a different sort of Other into the other-which-forms-us and the setting free of our freedom."¹⁴² Thus the Christian need not sacrifice her self, her will, or her freedom, but she should confess that she has no self, will, or freedom of her own, independently of God. As Alison points out, this is, in

¹⁴⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 215-16, 269.

¹⁴¹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 14.

¹⁴² Alison, 40-41.

part, the meaning of justification by faith, which is “precisely the reception of a social belonging that is completely removed from any sense of self-justification. In one sense it is no justification at all, because it is an identity received as given. The an-ecclesial hypostasis is that which is permanently locked in the necessity for self-justification, which means a constant comparison of self with others, deriving identity over against the other.” Giving up on the notion of self-justification and self-caused identity allows one to receive justification and identity from God. Alison says that in 1 John 3:2, “identity is something given as part of a becoming that cannot be grasped, but only received in patience. Identity is eschatological, not foundational.” Founded on the rock, that is, Christ, one’s desires are undistorted, so that one need no longer justify oneself over against any other. “Those who live in the spirit, like Paul himself, do not derive their identity in any way at all from what others think, whether they praise or condemn, because the identity is purely given by the Lord.”¹⁴³

Jesus calls Christians to imitate his desire to imitate the Father. He himself tries only to resemble God as closely as possible.¹⁴⁴ He does not, like nearly every advertising model, portray himself as an original. Humans cannot choose not to imitate, but they can choose their models, and true freedom is found in the choice between a human and a divine model.¹⁴⁵ The turn toward God is also a journey into the self, just as, conversely, the turning in of pride is a dispersal among others.¹⁴⁶ Pride results in futile attempts at self-securing through comparisons with others; the turn toward God leaves one free from comparison, alone with the source of one’s being. God and the Son of God are the only

¹⁴³ Alison, 169-70. 177.

¹⁴⁴ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 13.

¹⁴⁵ Alison sums up this Girardian interindividual psychology by saying, “‘being-constituted-by-another’ is simply part of being human, the key question being what sort of relationship to which other” (283).

¹⁴⁶ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 58-59.

models who, if their disciples imitate them as little children, will never be transformed into fascinating rivals.¹⁴⁷ There is no double bind or envy here. Jesus does not speak in terms of prohibitions, but in terms of models and imitation, thereby drawing out the consequences of the tenth commandment. He does not seek imitators in order to glorify himself, but to turn his followers away from mimetic rivalries. The only remedy against bad mimesis is good mimesis.¹⁴⁸ Non-Christians may think that Christians have to renounce their natural autonomy, but actually, by imitating Jesus, his disciples learn that their previous aspirations to autonomy have always lead them to bow down before individuals whom they cannot imitate without falling into the trap of rivalries. In the Garden, human beings possessed their own selves through God, but in their desire to be self-caused, they lost their selves (to various models, first of all the serpent). When people follow other models, they risk a loss of difference and identity. They become the pawns of mimetic desire and thus, as Jesus says in his prayer on the cross, they do not know what they are doing.¹⁴⁹ Because Jesus has no acquisitive desire, whoever takes him as a model will not meet any obstacles, and thus it is said that his yoke is easy and his burden is light.¹⁵⁰ For those who imitate Christ and the Father, the Kingdom has already

¹⁴⁷ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 430. Veblen suggests a change in the economic system as a solution to the problem of the rivalrous struggle to keep up appearances. He argues that the ultimate ground of this struggle “is the institution of private property. Under a régime which should allow no inequality of acquisition or of income, this form of emulation, which is due to the possibility of such inequality, would also tend to become obsolete. With the abolition of private property, the characteristic of human nature which now finds its exercise in this form of emulation, should logically find exercise in other, perhaps nobler and socially more serviceable, activities; it is at any rate not easy to imagine it running into any line of action more futile or less worthy of human effort.” See *Veblen on Marx, Race, Science and Economics*, 399. This thesis sees no reason to be so optimistic. A change in the system might lead to certain improvements, but cannot escape the rivalrous struggle and metaphysical desire at the heart of human mimesis. Only a change in models can hope to improve this situation. Choosing Christ as model might in turn lead to a more meaningful systemic change.

¹⁴⁸ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 105.

¹⁴⁹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 13-15, 40.

¹⁵⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 430.

come.¹⁵¹ Though Christ calls his disciples to a life of poverty, suffering, and martyrdom, their burden is light, and they live joyfully in God's kingdom. And while the advertising models promise nothing but comfort, pleasure, and self-glorification, they can give only desire, dissatisfaction, and slavery.¹⁵²

To follow Christ, the Christian must love the neighbor. In this way, the disciple avoids violent mimesis.¹⁵³ One must love the other as oneself if one is to avoid idolizing and hating the other. It is not the golden calf, but the other that now seduces human beings.¹⁵⁴ According to Girard, "Judeo-Christianity conceives of its own ascendancy at the individual level, not as a shamanistic, ecstatic possession, but rather as a de-possession" that is defined "in the context of the relationship to an other who can only become a neighbor insofar as he ceases to be that sacred and profane idol that desiring *mimesis* seems to make of him."¹⁵⁵ The command to love is not just a prohibition against hatred of and violence toward the other, but against idolization of the other and hatred of self. It suggests a remedy against prideful self-love, but also against the judgments by which people condemn themselves in the names of their models. One must confess that one is neither better nor worse than others.¹⁵⁶ Carl Rogers observes that self-acceptance makes meaningful change possible: "[T]he curious paradox is that when I accept myself as I am, then I change. I believe that I have learned this from my clients as well as within

¹⁵¹ Girard, *Job: The Victim of His People*, 158.

¹⁵² According to Alison, Paul insists "on the fundamental heteronomy of the human condition: we are slaves either to sin or to righteousness, which is to say that our 'I' is formed by our relationality with that which masters us, be it God or the sinful order following on from Adam's sin" (150).

¹⁵³ Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 215.

¹⁵⁴ Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground*, 129.

¹⁵⁵ Girard, *To Double Business Bound*, 45.

¹⁵⁶ Alison claims that without these comparisons, brotherly love replaces victimization: "Freedom, instead of being freedom from the constraints of the group, becomes freedom brought into being by gratuitous dependence on the group. As the person concerned learns not to derive his or her identity over against the other, so the existential rôles of victim and hero collapse into the one unique rôle of brother" (169).

my own experience—that we cannot change, we cannot move away from what we are, until we thoroughly *accept* what we are. Then change seems to come about almost unnoticed.”¹⁵⁷ Proust too seems to bear out this observation, for his narrator Marcel is neither better than the “little band” for his profound intelligence and staggering talent, nor worse for his lack of self-assurance before these girls. The realization that they and other models are like him allows him finally to change—to become the author he has aspired to be.

The Christian is resurrected into a new life, free of mimetic contagion and rivalry. Jesus is not recognized at first after his resurrection, but this is not due to his having less visibility or less reality. On the contrary, his “resurrection is too real for a perception dimmed by the false transfigurations of mimetic idolatry.”¹⁵⁸ In the resurrection, the Holy Spirit triumphs over mimetic violence and takes command of everything. The disciples do not regain possession of themselves; rather, the Holy Spirit possesses them. The resurrection is the emergence of a power superior to violent contagion and one not based on deception and hallucination. It does not deceive the disciples; on the contrary, it empowers them to recognize what they could not otherwise recognize. It leads them to reproach themselves for their flight into mimesis in the preceding days.¹⁵⁹ It must awaken Christians in consumer culture to the same reality, for they have taken flight into the mimesis promoted by advertising and in so doing have more than three times denied knowing the one who called them away from such mimesis.

¹⁵⁷ Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 17.

¹⁵⁸ Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 342.

¹⁵⁹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 189.

Conclusion

Girard's mimetic theory suggests that human freedom is not to be found in any individual, spontaneous desire, but rather in one's choice of models. If this is so, then consumerism seems to deprive people of their freedom. They may perhaps be able to choose from countless models, just as they choose from countless products, but these models, like the products, do not present real, meaningful choices. Girard occasionally discusses mimetic contagion in terms of possession, and this comparison seems particularly apt in the case of consumer mimesis, for the consumer is the victim of a strategy of feigned and anonymous desire, the influence of which the consumer refuses to admit. If these manifold models are like the demons that possess the consumer, then consumerism itself is the devil behind all these demons, and the devil hardly cares which of his minions succeeds on his behalf. Christ calls Christians away from the possession of consumerism. He presents all with a real choice: between human models and a divine model. Those who choose the latter admit that their desires are not their own. Though still imitators of a sort, they are, for the first time, honest about their situation, and for the first time, their model wants what is best for them. Rather than hating or idolizing the other, they come to see the other as someone like themselves. They come to love their neighbor as themselves, rather than coveting the neighbor's status symbols or imagined self-sufficiency. The endless cycle of competition and consumption has come to an end as they rest from pursuing their own glorification through the idolization of another and pursue instead the glorification of their God through whom they find their own empowerment.

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